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**WRITING THE NATION:  
FOUR INTER-WAR VISIONS OF SCOTLAND**

**By**

**Hanne Tange**

**A thesis submitted to the University of Glasgow  
in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of  
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University of Glasgow  
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*Til Tange-klanen  
i medgang og modgang*

## Summary

This thesis examines the visions of Scotland that come across in the inter-war writings of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir in relation to the ideas of the Scottish Literary Renaissance as a whole.

The initial part, "Into the Renaissance", consists of a historical account of Scottish political and cultural nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, followed by an examination of the ways in which the authors associated with the Scottish Renaissance participated in the construction of Scotland as an imagined community. Geography, history, religion, language and literature are identified as the five predominant themes in the inter-war tradition, on the basis of which the intellectuals created an image of the nation that could express their twin philosophies of nationalism and modernism.

The second part, "Four visions of Scotland", is composed of close readings of the work of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir in that order of appearance. The MacDiarmid chapter begins with a discussion of the poet's call for a Scottish Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s. It is argued that MacDiarmid set out with a strong belief in his own ability to awaken the nation, but that he became increasingly disappointed with the Scots' lack of response to his programme towards the end of the 1920s. This disillusionment resulted in a change of strategy in the 1930s when, on the one hand, he exchanged the politics of the National Party for his personal ideology of Scottish Republicanism, while, on the other, he abandoned previous attempts to reform the Scottish nation in favour of an idealised vision that was more compatible with his poetic aims.

"The periphery moves to the centre" focuses on the work of Neil Gunn. The two initial sections consider how the novelist attempted to rewrite Scottish geography and history in the 1920s and 1930s. The fiction is compared with Gunn's non-fictional writings in order to demonstrate to what an extent this revisionism was motivated by the author's political nationalism. The third part discusses Gunn's work of the late 1930s, in which he tried to balance his personal ideal of small-state nationalism against the internationalist philosophies of communism and socialism. Hence Gunn remained loyal to his nationalist beliefs throughout the 1920s and 1930s, which makes his vision of Scotland the most consistent of the four.



The chapter on Lewis Grassie Gibbon begins with a discussion of the manner in which the writer employs Scottish geography, history and language to construct his imagined community of Kinraddie. The second section concentrates on the relationship between the fiction of *Cloud Howe* and the non-fictional "Condition of Scotland" genre that developed in the 1920s and 1930, whereas the third part considers the implications of the author's ideological message. I conclude that Gibbon's *A Scots Quair* represents one of the strongest images of Scotland that emerged from the inter-war revival, but also that it associates the nation with the past, which is to say that it contains little hope for the future.

Finally, "Where things miscarry" examines Edwin Muir's ambivalent relationship with his home country. The chapter starts with a brief account of the writer's development in the 1920s, then moves into his criticism of the 1930s, which is more Scottish in orientation. It is argued that he originally sympathised with the idea of a Scottish Renaissance when he first encountered it in the early 1920s, but that he soon realised that Scotland and the Scots might not live up to MacDiarmid's high expectations. The second and third sections discuss how in Muir's writings of the 1930s the nation became synonymous with Calvinism, which again led the author to conclude that Scotland was an artistic wasteland. Accordingly, Muir's work leaves a negative vision that may counterbalance MacDiarmid's idealism.

The concluding part, "The dissociated imagination?", compares the four visions of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir. It is demonstrated how, on the one hand, the authors' use of geography, history, religion, language and literature in their writings increase the visibility of Scotland as an imagined community, whereas their lack of consensus on a number of key issues, on the other, weakens the nationalist argument. On the basis of that, I claim that the legacy of the Scottish Renaissance within Scottish literary tradition is the myths of continuity and dissociation which have been to the fore of the critical discourse in the twentieth century, but which must be deconstructed if one is to gain a full understanding of the period. In consequence, I propose a cultural historical approach to the Scottish Literary Renaissance which recognises the discursive nature of the literature as well as the fact that we are essentially dealing with a period of history.

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## **Author's declaration**

This thesis represents my own unassisted work, and no part of it has been submitted previously for any academic qualification. The views expressed are my own and not those of the University of Glasgow.

Hanne Tange

# Introduction

This thesis examines four visions of Scotland that emerge from the inter-war writings of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir. In the 1920s and 1930s, these writers were associated with the cultural movement that has become known as the Scottish Literary Renaissance. At the time, the Renaissance represented a reaction against the anglicisation and provincialisation that the inter-war generation saw in the work of their nineteenth-century predecessors. A primary objective was to secure a place for Scotland on the cultural map of Europe, which is to say that the Renaissance writers accepted Scotland as a nation in its own right, not a dependency of England. In culture as well as politics, the inter-war authors underlined their commitment to Scotland through an insistence on national difference. As a result, the literature of the period is dominated by Scottish themes to an unprecedented degree, and even sceptics such as Gibbon and Muir, who were less than convinced about the potentials of a politically autonomous Scotland, felt compelled to engage with such matters. The Scottish Renaissance constituted no united front, however, which brings me to the secondary purpose behind my work: on the basis of a reading of MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir within the over-all context of Scottish inter-war literature, I want to propose an inclusive concept of the Renaissance which does not neglect individualism in the search for common ground. I shall therefore consider the issues that drove my four authors apart as well as those that brought them together, for only by taking both into account, may we present a balanced view of the age.

I have chosen to approach the Scottish Renaissance from a cultural historical rather than a literary stance. My argument is based on the belief that the political, economic and social tendencies of an age are manifest in its literature, and in relation to Scottish inter-war writing specifically, my position is substantiated by the fact that each of my authors produced social commentary as well as creative writing. In consequence, my analysis does not distinguish between the creative and non-fictional genres, for, in my opinion, both offer valid insights into the thinking of a particular era. In terms of theory, I have made use of several methods which in different ways have provided useful perspectives in relation to my interdisciplinary approach. With regard to the questions of nation and nationhood, I have drawn on anthropological writers such as Ernest Gellner, Anthony Smith and Benedict Anderson. Nationalism features prominently in the study

of nineteenth-century Romanticism in Scotland and elsewhere, but twentieth-century literary scholars have been less enthusiastic about the national question. As a result, there would appear to be a reluctance to accept nationalism as a factor behind European modernism, even if Norwegian, Irish and Scottish examples suggest a connection between the two. My understanding of modernism has been inspired partly by classical accounts of early twentieth-century literature such as Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's *Modernism* (1991), partly by the work of cultural historians such as Stephen Kern and David Harvey. Modernism, the cultural historians claim, developed in response to a dramatic change in the human perception of the world and of humanity's place within it, which may account also for Scottish artists' return to native matters. As regards my method, I acknowledge the importance of critics such as M. M. Bakhtin, Michel Foucault and Hayden White, who in different ways have contributed to the breaking down of the barriers between absolute categories such as history and literature. I recognise the subjectivity of a literary text, yet accept its value as a historical document. A work of art may be produced by an exceptional individual, but it remains a product of its time, which is to say that it enables us to access information – the thoughts, the ideas, the priorities of a given era – that traditional history fails to provide. In accordance with that, I want to emphasise the relationship between the artist, his/her period and his/her art, which again presupposes an interdependency between literature and society.

On the Scottish side, I have found my search for an account of a period, which must be regarded as a formative stage in the continuing development of Scottish literature, somewhat frustrating. A large amount of critical attention has been paid to each of the writers in question, but with the exception of Duncan Glen's *Hugh MacDiarmid and the Scottish Renaissance* (1964) and Susanne Hagemann's *Die Schottische Renaissance: Literatur und Nation im 20. Jahrhundert* (1991), few attempts have been made towards placing the authors within their age. Of the two existing works, Duncan Glen is primarily concerned with the role of MacDiarmid, which means that he provides only a little information about other writers of the period. Susanne Hagemann, on the other hand, offers a summary of eighteen Renaissance associates' opinions on a selection of themes, but she never moves her examination from mere analysis into the level of abstraction. In addition, her study is in German, which is to say that more than sixty years after the modern revival in Scotland, no comprehensive account of the



Renaissance exists in English. In terms of history, the 1920s and 1930s have fared better. In *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes* (1993) and *Scotland and Nationalism* (1998), Christopher Harvie devotes a substantial part of his argument to inter-war Scotland, whereas the particular issue of Scottish nationalism has been addressed by Richard Finlay in *Independent and Free* (1994). Much work has yet to be done on the relationship between Scottish politics and culture, however, which has created some problems for my own research. Occasionally, therefore, my discussion may appear to be opening new questions where one would have preferred it to be resolving the old ones.

My examination will centre on the work of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir. They are the most outspoken of the Scottish inter-war writers with regard to the questions of nation and nationhood, which is important because that enables me to abstract from their writings four clear-cut visions of Scotland that may be balanced against a more generalised Renaissance programme. At the same time, it is their agreements and disagreements that to a large extent have defined the way Scottish Renaissance literature has been perceived by contemporary and later critics. Hence a focus on the tradition represented by MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir allows me to engage with the key issues in Scottish inter-war writing, yet avoid the dangers of a more inclusive discussion, which, because of its concern with a larger number of artists, would also increase the amount of details and exceptions that would have to be taken into consideration. Having said that, I shall not claim that MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir equal the Scottish Renaissance themselves. With regard to gender, the Scottish Renaissance contained a substantial female element, which is often overshadowed by the traditional concern with the men. Catherine Carswell's *Open the Door* from 1920 is the first manifestation of a new tendency in Scottish fiction, while many regard Willa Muir's *Imagined Corners* (1931) as one of the best inter-war novels. Similarly, Violet Jacob had already explored the vernacular when in the 1920s it was adopted by MacDiarmid, while Nan Shepherd's *The Quarry Wood* (1928) anticipated *Sunset Song*. My justification for excluding the women lies in the relative insignificance of the national question in their writings. While MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir engaged with the state of Scotland in their art, their female counterparts seem more interested in defining a space for women and in exploring female rather than national identity. In geographical terms, my four writers are equally unrepresentative. All derived from rural backgrounds, a legacy which shows in their creative writings in the form of a

relative detachment from industrial Scotland. There were other writers such as George Blake and James Barke, who revealed a greater insight into the conditions of urban Scotland, but, like the women, they were less interested in the national question, which makes them peripheral to my particular argument. Finally, the Lowland/Anglo-Scots element predominates in an ethnic sense. Though a Highlander himself, Neil Gunn had lost his ancestral Gaelic, which might make him unconvincing as a spokesperson for the Gael. As opposed to Celtic enthusiasts such as Ruairidh Erskine of Marr and Fionn Mac Colla, however, whose idea of the nation was based on Gaelic culture exclusively, Gunn's concept of Scotland embraced the Lowlands as well as the Highlands, which makes it relevant to the questions of nationalism and internationalism in a wider sense. In short, I would like to stress that there has been no qualitative judgement involved in my choice of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir over other Scottish inter-war writers. I have selected those four because they offer the fullest range of opinions on the specific topics that are at the heart of my analysis, and I have no doubt that an inquiry concerned with other matters might have identified four different spokespersons for the Scottish Renaissance.

As regards my theme, I want to concentrate on the construction of Scotland in the literature because I believe that to be the primary concern of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. In my initial part, I identify geography, history, religion, language and literature as the five main constituents of the nation as it is imagined by writers of the Renaissance, and on the basis of these, I will deconstruct the respective visions of Scotland that appear in the work of MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir. By so doing, I aim to demonstrate where these images resemble those of Scottish inter-war literature more generally, and where they are individualist in orientation, which will enable me to define the position of each artist vis-à-vis the Scottish Renaissance. Such an attempt to balance out the personal philosophies of four intellectuals against the over-all trends of their era depends on a substantial cultural historical component. As part of my examination, I shall therefore refer to the contemporary political, social, economic and cultural developments that may have influenced MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir at their time of writing. It is my aim to contextualise the four writers within their age, in other words, in order to identify the possible origins of their ideas as well as the manner in which each author incorporated such elements into his personal system of belief.



The time frame of my study is the 1920s and 1930s. Though the re-negotiation of values that took place in Europe after the First World War was a factor behind the resurgence of Scottish nationalism, it was only in the early 1920s it became evident that something was happening in Scottish culture. With the outbreak of the Second World War, on the other hand, the cultural and political climate changed in Scotland, which makes it problematic to speak of a Scottish Renaissance in my understanding of the term after 1939. In my reading of the four Renaissance writers I occasionally deviate from this over-all chronological frame: Edwin Muir, Hugh MacDiarmid and Neil Gunn all published works in the early 1940s that were inspired by the Renaissance ethos, if not indeed composed in the 1930s, and I have found it necessary to refer to these in order to present a rounded picture.

As it has been used throughout my discussion, the term the “Scottish Literary Renaissance” refers to Scottish inter-war writing in the widest sense. As Susanne Hagemann points out in *Die Schottische Renaissance*, the phrase is confusing because of the tendency among critics to invest in it different meanings (Hagemann 1991: 12-13). As adopted here, my concept of the Renaissance identifies as Renaissance literature all inter-war publications that engage with the ideas of Scotland and Scottishness. In my opinion, the Renaissance is not exclusively an artistic phenomenon, but a general discourse that engaged politicians, academics and journalists as well as poets. The “Scottish movement” and “revival” denote the national awakening more generally. Where my notion of “Renaissance” thus refers to a trend in Scottish writing, the Scottish “movement”/“revival” embraces political organisations such as the National Party of Scotland, cultural associations such as Scottish P.E.N. and individuals such as R. E. Muirhead and John MacCormick, who supported the nationalist cause without necessarily participating in the literary project. With regard to “nationalism” and “internationalism”, I use the former to suggest a commitment to one’s native country, the latter to imply solidarity across national boundaries. Nationalism tends to be connected to the separatist ideology of the National Party, whereas internationalism is associated with the left-wing principles of socialism and communism, although it should be remembered that the two concepts were not mutually exclusive to the Renaissance writers. On a similar note, the critic must bear in mind that these terms did not carry the same connotations to an inter-war author as they do today. The world had yet to awaken to the crimes of Nazism and Stalinism in the 1930s, which is to say that nationalism and

communism might offer hope to the Renaissance where to a late twentieth-century reader they have become synonymous with repression.

I have divided my inquiry into three parts. The first of these, "Into the Renaissance", provides the historical context of the Scottish Literary Renaissance. In this section, I will consider the general development of political and cultural nationalism from the end of the First World War to the late 1930s. I shall also introduce the writing of the period through a discussion of the manner in which Scottish intellectuals contributed to the re-invention of the nation during the inter-war years. My second part, "Four inter-war visions of Scotland", concentrates on the specific ideas of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir in that order of appearance. As part of my analysis, I will relate each writer to the political, cultural and economic circumstances that influenced him at the time of writing. My principal aim is to demonstrate how the single author employs the idea of Scotland in his art, which means that my reading will be determined by the priorities of the specific artist, not necessarily the categories of part one's generalised Renaissance programme. Finally, "The dissociated imagination?" offers a reflective approach to the Scottish Renaissance. In that concluding section, I want to compare the visions of Scotland that have emerged from my interpretation of the four writers, then consider the implications for our understanding of the period as a whole. At the end, it is my hope to deconstruct some of the myths in Scottish criticism which are the legacy of the inter-war revival, whilst pointing towards a more comprehensive perspective on the literature.

Though I have found it the most appropriate for a study like the present, I see two potential difficulties with my structure. First of all, the transition between the second and the third part appears somewhat artificial. One section offers a close reading of four individual writers, the other reflects on Scottish culture in a wider sense, and the connection between the two may not seem obvious at first. A summary towards the end of part two might have resolved the matter as that would widen the scope of the discussion in preparation for part three. The possible content of such has already been included in the concluding section, however, which would make it somewhat repetitive. A second issue relates to the internal structure of part two, for my order of MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir raises the question of negativism. Gibbon and Muir were pessimistic with regard to the prospects of Scotland, and an analysis that ends with their visions of the nation inevitably leaves the reader with a negative impression. Yet the

alternative, positive ideas of MacDiarmid and Gunn are no more representative in themselves, and I hope the pessimism may be balanced out by a conclusion that brings the four visions together. I thus admit to certain awkward structural decisions, but am uncertain whether a different structure would not have involved other problematic choices.

A final note on my reference system: I have adopted the Harvard System which incorporates references in parenthesis within the main text rather than in a separate section at the end. Within each parenthesis, the name refers to the author of a given source, the year to the date of publication, and the number to the page. Lower-case letters are used to distinguish between texts by the same writer that appeared within the same year, while I have occasionally included the title in order to avoid confusion. In addition, I have added the original date of publication whenever my edition of a primary work is not the original. Accordingly, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, which was first published in 1932, reads as (Gibbon 1932/1995a), whereas an Edwin Muir letter from 1924 becomes (Muir 1924/1974).

# **Part One**

## **Into the Renaissance**



# Into the Renaissance

*[It] is not the wild men of Scottish Nationalism who are to be feared: it is the dull men of unchanging Scotland.*

Arthur Marwick 1970

*[The] danger of our Movement, as of any movement or any man's mind, is not that of being too extreme, but of being not extreme enough.*

Hugh MacDiarmid 1928

## 1919 on the edge of catastrophe

In comparison with the developments leading up to and following upon that year, 1919 may seem rather uneventful. A world war, which had touched upon every layer of society, had just been brought to an end. The implications of the Versailles Peace Treaty were yet to awaken the small nations around Europe, while working-class radicalism, which had peaked during the war when the need to keep production going had placed great powers in the hand of the workers, was now being contained. The Scottish economy, which before 1914 had suffered from several structural weaknesses, still prospered from the war economy. Nobody could have foreseen that depression lurked just around the corner, and the general mood in the population was optimistic. Now that the war had been successfully concluded, things would go back to a pre-war normal, which would allow Scotland to resume its previous position as a mother-nation of the Empire, work-shop of the world. Such complacency did not prevent the odd critical voice from being raised. As early as 1918 the trade unionist William Diack observed in *The Scottish Review*:

For more than four years a bloody war has been waged - ostensibly at any rate - for the sake of small nationalities. Certainly the cause of Belgium, in the early days of the war, nerved the arm of many a Highland soldier to greater endeavour, and steeled the hearts of the people to heroic sacrifice. The right of small nations to 'self-determination' has been proclaimed to all the world as one of the guiding principles of the war policy of the Allies. For that ideal, Scottish blood and Scottish treasure have been poured out like water. And yet, although Scotland is one of the oldest of the small states of Europe, its claim to national independence is passed over in sullen and contemptuous silence by the Prime Minister of England. How long are the people of Scotland to tolerate these slights and insults? (Diack 1918: 438)

Diack's article is interesting for several reasons. First of all, the idea that Scotland should enjoy increased autonomy in compensation for the sufferings the nation had made for the rights of Belgium represents a rhetoric that recurs in nationalist propaganda in the 1920s and 1930s. Secondly, Diack argues for a reconstruction programme that would build houses in the cities and provide land to returning Highland veterans, and both these issues were central to the political debates of the inter-war period. Thirdly, he raises the question of national difference when he claims that the Union had served Scotland badly because it discouraged "Celtic culture and Scottish ideals" (Diack 1918: 440). More extreme versions of that theory appeared in the writings of the twenties and thirties when it became common among Scottish artists and intellectuals to use Scotland's Gaelic legacy as an element in their programme for national renewal. Accordingly, Diack encapsulates themes that became central to Scottish nationalism in the inter-war years, which makes his essay representative of the spirit nationalist leaders later claimed had emerged in Scotland towards the end of the First World War.

1919 has gained a central role in Scottish national mythology for three reasons: the end of World War One, the political, economic and social upheavals at the time, and the force of modernism. About the significance of the war to Scottish experience Hugh MacDiarmid writes in *Albyn*: "It took the full force of the War to jolt an adequate majority of the Scottish people out of their old mental, moral and material ruts; and the full force of post-war reaction is gradually bringing them to an effective realization of their changed conditions." (MacDiarmid 1927/1996a: 1). The war affected the minds of the Scottish population in different ways. To the front-line soldier it was an eye-opening experience. Many of the young men who enlisted had never been out of their home environment before, and now they found themselves in Flanders, Italy and Greece. Soon the excitement over exotic place-names and foreign manners waned. The idea of a quick victory turned into long years in the trenches, and it became increasingly important to the government to justify to these men why they were fighting. The politicians promised homes fit for heroes, but, as Christopher Harvie discusses in *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes*, the veterans discovered upon their return to Scotland that nothing much had changed (Harvie 1993: 70-72). A general feeling of discontent spread among the ex-combatants, many of whom decided to abandon Scotland in search for a better life abroad. Among those that remained at home, some turned to socialism in the hope that might better their circumstances, but a minority of those that had fought for Belgium



now thought it was time to do something for Scotland and joined the national movement. On the home-front, industrial workers discovered their strength in a country reliant on war production. A general shortage of labour had enabled women to enter the labour market, while old manners and ideas were generally being questioned. Scottish society had long been ready for change, it seemed, but it took the force of war to set the process going.

In the concluding chapter to *The Deluge*, Arthur Marwick's classic study of British society during the First World War, the author discusses how 1918-1919 saw upheavals at all levels of society (Marwick 1991: 329-55). Politically, the most significant change on the domestic scene was the Representation of the People Act (1918) which extended the franchise to all men above twenty-one and women above the age of thirty (Marwick 1991: 243). On the international stage the new star of Soviet Russia had emerged, which would dominate the political debate in the years to come. Other important trends were the decline of the Liberal Party and the rise of Labour, although it was only in the twenties such developments really started to make an impact on British politics. With reference to the economy, much was about to change. From 1914 to 1918 the Clydeside industries had benefited from a war that increased the demand for engineering products whilst temporarily removing foreign competition. In 1919 Scottish industry was still able to live off the boom created by the war. Once the production of armaments stopped, however, it became obvious that there existed some fundamental problems within Scottish industry. In *No Gods and Precious Few Heroes* Christopher Harvie describes how Scottish industrialists had failed to invest their war profits into new technology. As a result, Scottish machinery was too old-fashioned to compete, once the Empire started to build up native industries after the war (Harvie 1993: 22-23). In addition to these structural weaknesses, the Scottish economy was influenced by international processes. In the 1920s most Western nations were hit by inflation and unemployment to a hitherto unprecedented degree. The most obvious example is Germany, where only the rise of the Nazi party in 1933 restored confidence in the national economy, but also Scotland suffered from a recession which lingered on until the outbreak of war in 1939. Socially, most people improved their living standards between 1913 and 1918. Wages rose because of the labour shortage, which also enabled women to enter the work force, and middle-and working-class families were consequently left with more money. To many that meant improved diets, better health and a decline in mortality and disease. The war

did not solve the housing question, however, which was particularly serious in Scotland, and once the economic depression deprived the workers of their income, the old problems of ill health, malnutrition and overcrowding reappeared (Harvie 1993: 75-78).

As regards the third force of modernism, cultural historian Stephen Kern writes: "[The moderns] did not want to imitate the art of the past, and they did not want their lives to be regulated by social conventions that were conceived in the distant past and over which they had no control. Above all they wanted freedom" (Kern 1983: 63). At the heart of Kern's argument, and of modernism as such, is the question of discontinuity. On the whole, the moderns sought to leave behind them everything that might be associated with the past, and as Samuel Hynes discusses in *A War Imagined*, the war offered a convenient break (Hynes 1992: ix-xii). In writings such as "The Waste Land" (1922) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf imagined those five years of trench-war, shell-shock and broken illusions as an absolute break that cut their own present off from the 1913 condition of apparent harmony. In his initial chapter "The Wars Before the War", Hynes challenges the notion of pre-war stability through an examination of the conflicts that split British society in the period leading up to the war (Hynes 1992: 1-24). Yet the post-war generation often ignored earlier trends in order to present human experience in terms of pre-war, war and post-war, and, through a violent breaking-up of traditional forms, shed their art of all traits of an older world. Charles Murray, Neil Munro and J. M. Barrie would have to go, Hugh MacDiarmid argued in *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, not so much because they were poor writers, but because they represented an older, un-modern generation. Against their conservatism, MacDiarmid placed the experimentation associated with the most radical modernist groupings such as Ezra Pound's Vorticists and the Italian Futurists, for only art as fragmented as theirs might convey the destabilising impact of the war on the creative mind.

In theory, the upheavals in British society in the aftermath of the war and the insistence of the post-war artists on their detachment from the past may leave the impression of 1919 as the beginning of a new historical epoch. In reality, the changes often represented the culmination of long-term developments rather than a new departure, which reduces the significance of the year 1919 somewhat. With regard to the transformation of British society, Arthur Marwick suggests in *The Deluge* that the struggle for female franchise, a collectivist state and social reform may have been



helped by the war effort, but that it would have succeeded anyway (Marwick 1991: 29-30 and 32-33). With special reference to Scotland, it is interesting to reflect for a moment on the implications of the Scottish Home Rule Bill which actually passed its second reading in 1913 and which might have become law, had the war not intervened to postpone all discussion of devolution. Similarly, the Depression might have hit Scotland less hard, had the war production not boosted the Scottish economy temporarily and delayed a necessary reorganisation of the industry. These are mere speculations, of course, but they are speculations with a factual grounding. It is thus possible to read the war, not as a radical break in British experience, but as a drug that enabled the British people to maintain a belief in their Empire as the height of human evolution and consequently neglect the reconstruction that might have prevented the inter-war recession.

With reference to the literary problem, one of the writers most eagerly challenging the modernist reading is Compton Mackenzie. In his 1933 publication *Literature in My Time*, Mackenzie first criticises the moderns for their radical rejection of the past, then moves on to argue that the changes the writers of the early twenties claimed to have effected, characterised the literature of the pre-war generation too. Mackenzie writes of Ford Madox Ford:

I do not believe that any man was so well aware as he of the transformation that literature was undergoing, a transformation which would have taken place whether there had been a Great European War or not, that transformation being caused not by the mental, physical, or moral upheaval effected by the war, but coming as an inevitable result of the change in human life brought about by the increasing power of machinery, and its concomitant the rapid development of a megalopolitan culture. (Mackenzie 1933: 183)

One senses a certain despair as Mackenzie tries to ensure that his generation is not left stranded on the wrong side when MacDiarmid and his fellow-moderns start to burn their bridges to the past. He has a case, however. One of the truly radical stages of the modernist movement was the period leading up to the war when Wyndham Lewis was writing for *The New Age*, Italian Futurism challenged old conventions with its celebration of speed and violence, while Vorticist poets such as Ezra Pound foregrounded linguistic and formal experimentation. Modernism, in other words, had been well under way when the war broke out in 1913, and the attempt by the post-war moderns to present their art as a new departure only too easily obscures that connection.

To sum up, there are three reasons why 1919 may serve as a point of departure for a discussion of modern Scottish literature: firstly, the war meant an extension of people's horizons on the front as well as the home-front. Secondly, a number of political, economic and social upheavals coincided with and were in part a product of the war. The post-war artists' attempt to detach their work from that of previous ages, finally, meant that they imagined human experience in terms of pre-war, war and post-war, which again presents 1919 as the beginning of a new era. Against these views goes the argument that the war was a conservative rather than a progressive force (Marwick), and that 1919 was nothing but an artificially constructed divide (Mackenzie).

### **Enter "Hugh M'Diarmid": Scottish nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s**

One of the demobilised soldiers who came back from the war in 1919 was Sgt. Christopher Murray Grieve, who had been serving in Greece and France. As early as 1916 Grieve, or Hugh MacDiarmid as he was later to name himself, confessed in a letter to his former schoolmaster George Ogilvie that it was his intention, once the war had finished, to return to Scotland and engage himself in a spiritual reawakening of the nation (MacDiarmid 1916/1984a: 14). MacDiarmid was not alone in his feeling that something had to be done for Scotland. As Richard Finlay mentions in *Independent and Free* (Finlay 1994a: 1), the Liberal Party had been champions of Scottish Home Rule prior to 1914, but with Britain engaged in the war in Europe, such policies seemed unpatriotic. Accordingly, any consideration of Scotland's future within the United Kingdom was postponed. Around 1919 nationalist agitators, who had been silenced by the war, returned to the columns of Scottish newspapers. Old Home Rule organisations re-emerged, and there was a consensus among Scottish intellectuals that it was time for Scotland to liberate itself from an England exhausted by war. Together with its Celtic sister-nation Ireland, Scotland was presented as a force of radicalism, whilst England remained stranded in its pre-war conservatism. Now the most modern ideas in Europe came from Russia and Scandinavia while old empires such as the British appeared exempt from all progressivism. One exponent of this view is "Edward Moore" [Edwin Muir], who writes in *The New Age* in 1921:

In England everything is too late. A new idea, a new form of art, must be dragged triumphantly through France, Germany, Russia, Norway, Portugal, before its dusty corpse is received by us with complacent ceremony. The spontaneous need of the spirit from which the idea sprang



may be past, may be exhausted in its own bitter dissatisfaction, but the dead idea will serve us nevertheless far better than a living one. England is the hell of lost ideas, the English Channel is the Styx, and the English intellectual is Charon disguised as St. Peter. (Muir 1921a: 5)

It is interesting that such a Spenglerian notion of an exhausted English civilisation has become the major argument behind the “modernism is provincialism” thesis in Scottish literary criticism. Robert Crawford makes most of it when in *Devolving English Literature* he claims that the energies which drive modernism derive from the modernist writer’s peripheral position in relation to English culture (Crawford 1992: 218-19). Cairns Craig reaches a similar conclusion in his introduction to the twentieth-century volume of *The History of Scottish Literature* where he ascribes the rising North American, Australian, Irish and Scottish canons to the collapse of English tradition in the aftermath of the war (C. Craig 1987: 5). It is necessary to be cautious of such readings, however. Scottish writers and intellectuals of the inter-war years were capable myth-makers, and they had every interest in portraying England as an old, decadent culture in opposition to a young Scotland on the rise.

The three issues, which more than any other put the national question back on the political agenda in post-war Scotland, were the Versailles Treaty, events in Ireland and a general discontent in Scottish society. With the principles laid down in the Versailles Treaty, Scottish nationalists gained a moral backing for their claims. The right of small nations to self-determination was probably never meant to be applied to problematic areas such as Scotland and Ireland, but once the fire of nationalism burnt fiercely throughout Europe, its spread could no longer be controlled. First Ireland, then Scotland, raised the question why Versailles granted to new countries such as Finland and Lithuania what the Celtic nations could not have. Versailles told the world that the Irish and Scots were, in theory, right, and its principles were consequently absorbed into nationalist propaganda. In the light of that, it is not surprising that the post-war era came to represent a new departure for the Scottish national movement. On the eighth of May, 1923, Hugh MacDiarmid wrote in *The Scottish Nation*:

The War, however, brought a sharp reaction. The danger of the submersion of our distinctive national culture is less to-day than it has been for many decades. The whole process of assimilation has not only been arrested but has been in many directions strikingly reversed. The Scottish Home Rule movement, after mysteriously hanging fire for generations has leapt into a flame which is illuminating on all hands the

irreconcilable diversity of Scottish and English interests and tendencies.  
(MacDiarmid 1923a: 2)

As regards the Irish question, there were few places the Irish struggle had been followed more intensely than in Scotland. In the 1880s it was assumed that Home Rule for Ireland would inevitably lead to increased Scottish autonomy; and as James Hunter notes in "The Gaelic connection: the Highlands, Ireland and nationalism, 1873-1922", a mutual concern with the Easter Rising brought socialist John MacLean and nationalist Ruaraidh Erskine of Marr together in the 1916 (Hunter 1975: 198-99). In the 1920s, Scottish polemics such as the writings of Hugh MacDiarmid show a strong interest in the happenings in Ireland, but such concerns seem to have waned in the 1930s. A major factor behind such a loss of interest on the Scottish side was the economic depression which underlined that social reconstruction was a more urgent concern than constitutional change. The Irish Civil War and the differences between Scottish Presbyterianism and Irish Catholicism probably played a part too, however.

A final issue in post-war Scotland is the general mood of discontent within the nation. For Scottish veterans, the return to Scotland was not a happy experience. If they came back to the industrial region, they would experience difficulties in finding a place to work and to live, while the rural areas represented a world in decline where the inhabitants had no choice but to struggle or leave. Many either accepted such bleak conditions or emigrated, but a minority of writers and intellectuals started to question how things had come to this. Such speculations are at the heart of Scotland's national awakening and resulted in a series of publications on the state of the nation in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Scotland had a moral basis for its claims in the principles of the Versailles Treaty, the nation had in Ireland a possible model for imitation as well as a group of citizens unhappy with the status quo, and in combination, these factors provided a breeding ground for Scottish nationalism.

The first stage in the development of the national movement in inter-war Scotland runs from 1919 to the foundation of the National Party in 1928. It is characterised by relative agreement among the factions within Scottish nationalism, and major events include Hugh MacDiarmid's call for a Scottish literary renaissance in 1922 and the formation of the National Party of Scotland in 1928. The amount of attention paid to the national question at the time in Scottish newspapers such as *The Glasgow Herald* suggests a concern with the national question in the Scottish population more generally.



Much was made of the Home Rule motions put forward by members of Scottish Labour in the 1920s, nationalist rallies were covered extensively, while the established press opened its pages to announcements from the nationalist organisations. On the first of November, 1923, *The Glasgow Herald* published the following letter from the Scottish Home Rule Association to delegates of the Imperial Conference:

The need for self-government in Scotland has never been more urgent. Many post-war problems are pressing for solution. Our country is like a man with his right hand tied behind his back, unable to help himself – a most humiliating position when it is remembered that Scotland's record of unconquered national existence is hardly paralleled in Europe, and that its people have no lack of experience in the affairs of government. Is it because Scotland has been too constitutional in its methods of pressing for self-government that its demand has been ignored? (Steel and Muirhead 1923: 6)

The most important nationalist organisations in the 1920s were the Scottish Home Rule Association (SHRA) and the Scots National League (SNL), for many of the individuals that were later to play a large part in the Scottish National Party started their career in one of these groupings. Since Richard Finlay has provided a detailed account of these associations in *Independent and Free*, I shall sketch their development briefly. The SHRA was originally founded in 1886. Its activities had been hindered by the outbreak of war in 1914, which made the Home Rule issue seem somewhat unpatriotic. The organisation came to play a vital part in Scottish politics after its reorganisation in 1918, however. Richard Finlay names Roland Eugene Muirhead, a wealthy businessman, as the central figure in the post-war association because of his financial resources which provided the basis for Tom Johnston's weekly *Forward*, the SHRA and from 1928 the National Party (Finlay 1994a: 1). The key concern of the association was Scottish Home Rule within the Empire, and the SHRA hoped to achieve this through the encouragement of a broad cross-party alliance on the devolution question (Finlay 1994a: 2). In practice, the SHRA became the platform on which Labour MPs acted out their ideas on Home Rule. Once parliamentary Labour made it clear that it had no intention of standing up for Scottish self-government before more "serious" problems such as the economic crisis and housing shortage had been solved, the SHRA's days were numbered. The final blow came in 1928 when Muirhead announced that he would join the newly founded National Party. With him he took the financial support that had kept the organisation going, and in 1929 the SHRA was dissolved (Finlay 1994a: 23-24).

The only other nationalist body with an influence comparable to the SHRA was the Scots National League which had been formed in 1920 by a group of people associated with the Highland Land League. Central to the organisation were the Celtic revivalists Ruairaidh Erskine of Marr and William Gillies, and while the SHRA primarily fought for the pragmatic principle of Home Rule, SNL propaganda was founded on the notion of spiritual revival. An important issue was the rewriting of Scottish history. According to the SNL, the English had used history to weaken Scottish ties with the nation's Celtic origins, and that had left Scotland a divided nation. In *Independent and Free*, Finlay quotes the following example of such propaganda:

We in Scotland have much to learn from Ireland; in this respect, we are more than ten years behind her. First we must build up our national conscience, and blushing from its discovery, we must set ourselves to build up our nationality from the foundation. The foundation – the bedrock of our Celtic origin – is already there awaiting the builders, and the cornerstone – our Gaelic language; the only national language of Scotland, is already in the hands of the hewers. (Finlay 1994a: 39)

Similar ideas were incorporated in the national mythology developed by Scottish writers in the thirties, and although the SNL later distanced itself from such gross, racist statements, they undoubtedly influenced the idea of Scotland in the popular imagination. Yet there was more to the SNL than Celticism. As opposed to the SHRA, the Scottish National League was outright separatist, anti-imperialist and against any attempt to co-operate with other political groupings, which left the organisation free to attack on all sides where the SHRA had to steer carefully between its potential allies of Labour and the Liberals.

Outside the SHRA and the SNL, the most prominent nationalists were John MacCormick of the Glasgow University Scottish Nationalist Association, Lewis Spence of the Scottish National Movement and early converts such as Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Compton Mackenzie and the Duke of Montrose. Their differences in opinion were as wide as the social gaps. From the beginning, the national movement was made up by a number of individuals whose sole meeting point seemed to be the notion that something needed to be done for Scotland. Initially, their common belief in the need for a parliament for Scotland was powerful enough to overrule potential areas of conflict. Accordingly, the Scottish nationalist groupings met in the late twenties with a view to form a more effective, political body. The result of their efforts was the National Party of Scotland which was founded in 1928.



On the cultural front, things had been developing since the early 1920s. C. M Grieve, or Hugh MacDiarmid as he was later to call himself, had returned from the war with an ambition to change the attitudes of his fellow-Scots to all matters Scottish, and although he initially held on to the Scottish literary establishment when he invited Neil Munro and John Buchan to contribute to his *Northern Numbers* anthology, he soon parted with his forebears. "Not traditions - precedents!" read the slogan on the cover of *The Scottish Chapbook*, which is where the Scottish Literary Renaissance begins. At first, it was less than obvious that Grieve's concept of a Scottish revival should become so heavily associated with the Scots vernacular. *Annals of the Five Senses*, his first collection of poetry and prose, was composed in experimental English at a time when the author was campaigning heavily against the attempt by the Vernacular Circle and Burns Federation to revive the Scots language. Their intentions were conservative, Grieve stressed in a 1922 letter to *The Aberdeen Free Press*, which made them incompatible with his modernist principles of innovation and experimentation (MacDiarmid 1922/1984a: 754-6). Six months later, the writer appears to have changed his mind. At this point, he had published his first vernacular poetry under the pen-name of Hugh MacDiarmid and in August, 1922, he proclaimed in the first edition of *The Scottish Chapbook*:

The principal aims and objects of *The Scottish Chapbook* are: –

To report, support, and stimulate, in particular, the activities of the Franco-Scottish, Scottish-Italian, and kindred Associations; the campaign of the Vernacular Circle of the London Burns Club for the revival of the Doric; the movement towards a Scots National Theatre; and the 'Northern Numbers' movement in contemporary Scottish poetry.

To encourage and publish the work of contemporary Scottish poets and dramatists, whether in English, Gaelic, or Braid Scots.

To insist upon the truer evaluations of the work of Scottish writers than are usually given in the present over-Anglicised condition of British literary journalism, and, in criticism, elucidate, apply, and develop the distinctively Scottish range of values.

To bring Scottish Literature into closer touch with current European tendencies in technique and ideation.

To cultivate 'the lovely virtue'.

And, generally, to 'meddle wi' the Thistle' and pick the figs.

(MacDiarmid 1922: iii)

In different ways, language, criticism and international outlook were all central to the modern revival. MacDiarmid sought a Scottish literature that was at once modern and national, and after a few early experiments with English, he considered that the best way to achieve this was through the Scots language. A concern with the medium of literature

was not peculiar to Scotland. James Joyce and Ezra Pound had already demonstrated ways in which experimental language might express a modern experience, and the Scottish poet was undoubtedly influenced by their example. Peculiar to MacDiarmid was the choice of a poetic vehicle that was at once Scottish and contemporary, however. Although the above manifesto in principle opened *The Scottish Chapbook* to work in English and Gaelic as well as Scots, the Scottish revival became synonymous with MacDiarmid's vernacular verse of the 1920s. Such linguistic experimentation represented a radical departure from the conventions of previous generations and the poet was celebrated by fellow-poets and nationalists as the voice of a young Scotland on the rise.

Although the language question tends to dominate contemporary and later accounts of the Scottish Renaissance, literary criticism was equally important to MacDiarmid and his contemporaries. A Scottish revival depended on the amount of attention paid to literature in Scotland and abroad, which required critics and reviewers who could draw the attention to the new trends in Scottish culture. Yet the moderns found the Scottish Press reluctant to open its pages to their work. As David Finkelstein discusses in his 1998 essay "Literature, Propaganda and the First World War", *Blackwood's Magazine*, which was the sole survivor from the heyday of the Scottish literary magazines in the nineteenth century, had declined into a mere outlet for establishment propaganda during the war, and such conservatism was incompatible with modernist radicalism (Finkelstein 1998: 2-3). Scottish newspapers were no more enthusiastic about modernism. In order to accommodate critics such as Edwin Muir, who had hitherto been writing for English and American presses, MacDiarmid therefore established Scottish journals such as *The Scottish Chapbook*, *The Scottish Nation* and *The Northern Review*. Despite the gesture, Edwin Muir remained sceptical. His contributions to the venture did not prevent him from characterising *The Scottish Nation* as a "very bad paper" in a 1923 letter, which suggests that it may have been his admiration for MacDiarmid's energy rather than a commitment to the Renaissance project that made him offer his work (Muir 1923/1974: 29). Whatever their individual motivations, MacDiarmid's contributors were united in the belief that an alternative approach to Scotland was needed, and their commitment became the foundation for much Renaissance propaganda in the thirties when the critical revaluation of the Scottish scene got under way.



Internationalism, finally, may be the most significant aspect of the cultural revival. To Scottish intellectuals, an international outlook partly involved an attempt to bring Scottish writing to a wider audience, partly the introduction of European ideas into Scottish culture. The obvious internationalists within the Renaissance group were Willa and Edwin Muir, who had spent a considerable time in Europe in the 1920s and who became the English translators of writers such as Franz Kafka and Herman Broch. Hugh MacDiarmid also claimed recognition as a translator when in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* he adapted translations of Dostoevsky, Rilke and Solovyov. The efforts of the Muirs and MacDiarmid are interesting in the light of following passage from Susan Bassnett's introduction to *Comparative Literature*:

Evan-Zohar argues that extensive translation activity takes place when a culture is in a period of transition: when it is expanding, when it needs renewal, when it is in a pre-revolutionary phase, then translation plays a vital part. In contrast, when a culture is solidly established, when it is in an imperialist stage, when it believes itself to be dominant, then translation is less important. (Bassnett 1993: 10)

Bassnett offers one possible explanation why translation activities were so important to the Scottish writers: that is, the Scots were looking for models that would at once enable them to renew their tradition and preserve a sense of Scottish difference against the English cultural hegemony. In the 1920s, the international element was mainly artistic as the Renaissance group looked to European modernism in order to expand its cultural horizon. In the 1930s, on the other hand, the external input was often political as the younger generation of Grassie Gibbon and James Barke started to define its position in relation to ideological trends such as Italian fascism and Soviet communism. In spite of their different priorities, the writers of the 1930s continued to follow European developments closely, however, which is to say that internationalism remained a factor in Scottish intellectuals' battle against provincialism throughout the inter-war period.

When in 1928 members of Scotland's various nationalist organisations met with the purpose of founding a National Party for Scotland, the political and cultural wings of the national movement were still in touch with each other. Renaissance authors Hugh MacDiarmid, Compton Mackenzie and Neil Gunn were actively involved at executive level in the young nationalist party, while in 1932 Alexander MacEwen, founder-member of the Scottish party and future chairman of the Scottish National Party, emphasised in *The Thistle and the Rose* that the literary revival was a significant part of the national awakening (MacEwen 1932: 1-2). By the mid-1930s, political and cultural

nationalists were moving in different directions. It was no longer possible for political pragmatics such as John MacCormick and idealists like MacDiarmid to find common ground, and Tom Nairn has identified this separation between politics and culture as one of the major ideological weaknesses of Scottish nationalism. Nairn writes in *The Break-Up of Britain*:

The weakness of the Scottish national movement is the contrary of the Welsh one: it is the consistent, canny philistinism of the movement from its earliest days, and the chronic divorce between what Lewis Spence called the “practical, Scotsman-like” policy and the distinctly erratic flights of the intelligentsia. The Scottish movement benefits from the existence of a powerful middle-class; yet one of the traits of that class tends to be a powerful distrust of culture in any spectacular form. (Nairn 1981: 214)

The development of the political movement from the establishment of the National Party in 1928 to the foundation of the Scottish National Party in 1934 substantiates Nairn’s allegation of philistinism. In an attempt to consolidate the party’s position within Scottish politics, Party Secretary John MacCormick tried to steer the organisation away from the outright separatism and anti-English sentiments it had inherited from the Scottish National League towards more moderate ideas. MacCormick wanted to accommodate the right-wing Scottish Party, which had been formed by Andrew Dewar Gibb and George Malcolm Thomson, among others, in 1930, and in a panic-like move, he decided to suppress the radical tendencies within his own party in preparation for a merger. As Richard Finlay discusses in *Independent and Free*, that involved the marginalisation of National Party activists, who were considered too extreme for the right-wing nationalists (Finlay 1994a: 140-41). Among MacCormick’s primary targets were Hugh MacDiarmid, who had become increasingly attracted to radicalism towards the end of the 1920s. As Alan Bold has discussed the details surrounding MacDiarmid’s turbulent relationship with the National Party in his biography, however, I shall not elaborate on it here (Bold 1990: 267-75). The 1933 expulsion of the radicals prepared the ground for a meeting between moderate National Party representatives such as MacCormick and Neil Gunn and leaders of the Scottish Party. Together they drew up a common political platform for the new Scottish National Party, which, as opposed to the original, separatist manifesto of the National Party, accepted a place for Scotland within the Empire (Finlay 1994a: 153-54). Meanwhile, the cultural activists were becoming increasingly detached from the National Party. With the exception of novelist Neil



Gunn, it is thus fair to say that the bridges between literary and political nationalism had been burnt by the time the Scottish National Party came into existence in 1934.

On the cultural scene, the idea of a Scottish revival continued to develop in the thirties. Many of the early contributors to MacDiarmid's publishing ventures only came into their own in the 1930s, while new voices such as Willa Muir, Eric Linklater and Lewis Grassie Gibbon emerged. Though the joint activities of MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Edwin Muir, William Soutar and Catherine Carswell, among others, today seem adequate proof that a new generation of Scottish authors was emerging, the moderns found it hard to be recognised in their home country. Members of the general public accused the young authors of being too eager to disclaim Scotland's literary icons when they had yet to produce any work of their own. The following extract from *The Glasgow Herald* is representative of such criticism:

To speak of a Scottish renaissance [is] misleading. Scottish literature has never been in a moribund condition. But a certain section of ultra-modern poets and literary men would seem to be seeking notoriety by attacks on the older writers, sometimes in the form of intelligent criticism, but more often mere vulgar abuse. The public would, however, soon grow tired of vindictive onslaughts on its old favourites, and demand that these young men do some real creative work themselves, and produce something other than bombastic criticism of their betters. (Anon. 1930: 6)

The specific work in question may have been MacDiarmid's *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (1926), which provoked much controversy at the time of publication because of the poet's attempt to replace old literary icons with a group of new authors, but a browsing through Scottish newspapers in the late twenties and early thirties confirms that such language is not unique. In spite of this lack of recognition, it became obvious around 1930 that something was happening in Scottish culture. In poetry MacDiarmid remained the predominant figure because of the radical nature of his experiments, although the work of William Soutar, Sorley Maclean and Edwin Muir, among others, shows that the poetic revival was never a one-man band. As early as 1920 Catherine Carswell's *Open the Door!* had demonstrated that MacDiarmid was wrong when in 1926 he dismissed the narrative genre in *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, and her lead was followed by the work of Neil Gunn, Eric Linklater, Willa Muir and Lewis Grassie Gibbon in the 1930s (MacDiarmid 1926/1995: 348-49). The attempt to encourage Scottish criticism culminated in a number of works on the state of the nation, while new journals such as *The Modern Scot*, *Outlook* and *The Voice of Scotland* tried to fill the

gap that had been opened when *The Scottish Chapbook* and *The Scottish Nation* ceased publication. The critical revaluation of Scotland, which MacDiarmid had started, when in 1922 he called out for a great Scottish literary renaissance, reached a climax with the eight volumes of the *Voice of Scotland* series, initiated and edited by Gibbon and MacDiarmid, all of which provide valuable insights into the way Scottish Renaissance writers perceived their contemporary Scottish scene.

With reference to the question of political nationalism, the cultural revivalists adopted a different agenda in the 1930s. While in the 1920s MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn and Compton Mackenzie had been engaged with national issues, Scottish writers were increasingly attracted to socialism in the thirties. As a result, it was not just that the political movement expelled the poets, but to an equal extent, the cultural movement that withdrew from nationalism. Several factors contributed to the process that between 1928 and 1935 brought the political and the cultural wings of Scottish nationalism from a state of mutual sympathy to hostility and divorce. Firstly, it soon became clear that the National Party lacked voter appeal. It had achieved a couple of successes at the Glasgow University Rectorial Elections in 1928 and 1931, but beyond the university the nationalists' breakthrough came only too slowly. Obvious explanations were organisational weaknesses and the economic depression, which had made questions of devolution irrelevant to most Scottish voters. To those John MacCormick added a third: the elitist outlook adopted by Hugh MacDiarmid and the Renaissance group. In his autobiography *The Flag in the Wind* MacCormick writes on MacDiarmid:

Although I have no doubt that he has done invaluable work in the whole field of Scottish literature I am certain that C. M. Grieve has been politically one of the greatest handicaps with which any national movement could have been burdened. His love of bitter controversy, his extravagant and self-assertive criticism of the English, and his woolly thinking, which could encompass within one mind the doctrines both of Major Douglas and Karl Marx, were taken by many of the more sober-minded of the Scots as sufficient excuse to condemn the whole case for Home Rule out of hand. (MacCormick 1955: 35)

Not surprisingly, MacDiarmid was among the first to go once the politically pragmatic MacCormick launched his endeavour to moderate the National Party. With the poet went a strong tie between cultural and political nationalism, as MacDiarmid was one of the cultural movement's most prominent Home Rule supporters.

The National Party was not entirely to blame for the divorce between culture and politics, however. In the early 1930s MacDiarmid and fellow-writers such as Fionn Mac



Colla and Compton Mackenzie adopted very extreme views on nationalism and they showed no more sympathy with MacCormick's ideas than he with their radicalism. In a 1929 contribution to *The Scots Independent*, MacDiarmid emphasised how the national movement would have to distance itself from the establishment through a confrontational strategy which he described as a "species of Scottish fascism" (MacDiarmid 1929/1997: 80). By 1930, that idea had been developed into a programme for a militaristic organisation, which MacDiarmid named Clann Albain and advertised in *The Daily Record* in May, 1930:

Clann Albain is no new thing. It has been built up steadily during the past two years. The majority of its members are members of the national party [though] the latter has no responsibility for it. One of the most distinguished of living Scotsmen is the Chief of Clann Albain. I am not at liberty to divulge his name, or those of the other office bearers. The organization is an exclusive one – no one is admitted to membership who is not thoroughly guaranteed and tested. The members, apart from an inner circle, do not know the names of any of the office bearers. The whole organization is on a militaristic basis, and in this resembles the Fascist movement. (as quoted in Bold 1990: 282)

To the novelist's great embarrassment, MacDiarmid identified Mackenzie and himself as the leaders of this fascist grouping, which may have determined the poet's future within the National Party, for to many moderate nationalists, fascism was a label that was best avoided. Accordingly, the Clann Albain project provided MacCormick with a strong case against MacDiarmid, who was eventually expelled from the party in 1933. The relationship between the National Party and the Renaissance group was not made any easier when writers associated with the literary revival openly attacked the nationalist programme. Edwin Muir's *Scottish Journey*, which came out of his 1935 encounter with a Scotland ridden by physical and spiritual depression, concluded that it was socialism, not nationalism the country needed. The problem with nationalism, Muir suggested, was that it offered a constitutional answer to an economic crisis (Muir 1935/1985: 248). The Scottish malaise was related to the fundamental problems of the capitalist system, not a decline in nationhood, and increased autonomy was therefore unlikely to improve the condition of Scotland (Muir 1935/1985: 248-49). Muir's argument resembles that of Lewis Grassie Gibbon, who in 1934 dismissed nationalism in his essay "Glasgow". "What a curse to the earth are small nations!" Gibbon declared, then went on to challenge the significance of nationhood to modern life (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 144). Other writers such as the communist novelist James

Barke were equally dismissive of nationalism, which seems to justify MacCormick's doubts about the literary movement.

To sum up, the development of the national movement in Scotland 1919-1935 divides into two stages, 1919-1928 and 1928-1935. Phase one is characterised by co-operation between the Home Rule movement and the cultural revivalists. The various factions meet in the belief that it is necessary to act for Scotland, and on the basis of their consensus, the National Party is founded in 1928. In contrast, the period 1928-1935 is marked by internal divides within Scottish nationalism. John MacCormick's attempt to steer the National Party in a moderate direction alienates his supporters from the party's more extreme elements. The 1934 merger with the Scottish Party turns out to be at the expense of National Party principles, with the choice of a pragmatic political line eventually leading to the split between cultural and political nationalism.

## The voice of Scotland

In 1964, the Czech historian Ernest Gellner commented in *Thought and Change* on the somewhat elusive nature of nationhood: "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist" (Gellner 1964: 169).

Twenty years later Gellner expressed similar ideas in *Nations and Nationalism*:

Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as an inherent though long-delayed political destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: *that* is a reality, for better or worse, and in general an inescapable one.  
(Gellner 1983: 48-9)

Gellner's concern with the imaginary qualities of nationhood is paralleled in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. In his introduction, Anderson identifies four criteria which are central to our sense of nationhood. Firstly, the nation is *imagined* because, in Anderson's words, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991: 6). Secondly, Anderson perceives the nation as *limited* because it depends upon specific, geographical boundaries - "No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind" (Anderson 1991: 7). Anderson's third criterion is not unsurprisingly *sovereignty* as all nations rely on a sense of autonomy, while the fourth criterion is *community*, the conception of the nation as a "deep, horizontal comradeship" which has inspired "so many millions of people, not so much



to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings” (Anderson 1991: 7). Anderson’s final words identify him as a sceptic with regard to the possible benefits of nationalism. His definition of nationhood highlights visibility, limitation, sovereignty and cohesion as crucial to the strength of the national community, however, which are the aspects of his work I find relevant in relation to the Scottish Literary Renaissance.

Applying Anderson’s general theory of nationhood to the particular conditions of inter-war Scotland, we find that there were several potential problems with the idea of Scotland in the 1920s and 1930s. Firstly, the Renaissance writers found it hard to envisage Scotland as a distinct, national entity. The nation was imagined, Anderson claimed, because it established a shared sense of belonging between individuals who might never meet. In most European nations that common identity was based upon a combination of constitutional and historical factors, but in Scotland, the 1707 Union had resulted in the divorce between national identity, which was Scottish, and political identity, which became British. As Richard Finlay discusses in his essay “National Identity in Crisis”, that had not caused any difficulties before the 1920s as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectuals accepted Scotland as “an equal partner with England in the founding and running of the British Empire” (Finlay 1994b: 242). In contrast, the inter-war generation wanted to emphasise the Scottish element at the expense of the British, because that would strengthen their case for self-determination. Anderson’s second concept of the limited nation is more easily applied to inter-war Scotland, for even if the Union had removed the country from the political map of Europe, a separate religious, legal and educational system survived. Moreover, the border continued as an administrative boundary, which allowed the idea of Scotland as a distinct, geographical unit to prevail. If such clear-cut limits to the nation increased the sense of Scottish nationhood, Anderson’s third principle of sovereignty undermined it for Scotland was hardly autonomous in the 1920s and 1930s. Since the 1707 Union the country had been ruled from Westminster, and after the First World War, it became common to regard the dominance of English representatives within the British Parliament as a disadvantage to Scottish interests. From *The Glasgow Chamber of Commerce Journal*, Richard Finlay quotes: “Scotland has her own particular problems and we will never make much progress until masters and men realise that what applies to England does not necessarily apply here” (Finlay 1994b: 246). Anderson’s fourth criterion raised other concerns, for to many Scots, the sense of nationhood had to be



measured against a variety of regional, ethnic and sectarian identities. In the nineteenth century, Walter Scott's fictional histories had presented Scotland as a nation divided between Highlanders and Lowlanders, Presbyterians and Catholics, to which the process of industrialisation had added the gap between the industrial Central Belt and rural Scotland. With reference to this, it is interesting that two of the most significant social uprisings in modern Scottish history were both confined to a relatively limited area: the land wars of the Skye crofters gained little support outwith the Highlands, the Clydeside movement was a Glasgow phenomenon primarily, which is to say that pre-existing ethnic, social and geographical loyalties were allowed to overrule a general sense of Scottishness. In short: inter-war Scotland was hardly an imagined community in Benedict Anderson's understanding of the term. The principal achievement of the national movement in the 1920s and 1930s was therefore the consciousness-raising project of the Scottish Literary Renaissance because it made the Scottish nation imaginable.

The Renaissance concern with the state of Scotland comes to the fore in the non-fiction of the inter-war years. An early example is George Malcolm Thomson's *Caledonia: or The Future of Scotland* (1927), in which the author reveals the dismal conditions of his contemporary Scotland, but Thomson had only just predicted the end of the Scottish race when Hugh MacDiarmid retorted in the somewhat more optimistic *Albyn: or Scotland and the Future*. The titles are significant. On the one hand, these works contain an analysis of the state of Scottish society as well as the developments that had brought the nation to that stage. On the other, they stress that there might be a future for Scotland, but that it involves a strong, ideological commitment. Thomson's *Caledonia* and MacDiarmid's *Albyn* are early specimens of a genre peculiar to inter-war Scotland. I have named this type of writing the "Condition of Scotland" literature, and other examples are David Cleghorn Thomson (ed.), *Scotland in Quest of Her Youth* (1932), Andrew Dewar Gibb, *Scotland in Eclipse* (1930), Alexander MacEwen, *The Thistle and the Rose* (1934), George Malcolm Thomson, *Scotland That Distressed Area* (1935) and Alexander Macle hose, *The Scotland of Our Sons* (1937). The titles underline the authors' concern with the contrasting ideas of contemporary depression versus future regeneration, and, as the symbolism suggests, the majority point to a nationalist solution. Although the above works were mostly composed by politicians and journalists, the creative writers engaged with similar ideas. The result of their efforts is a

long list of non-fictional publications, among the most famous Neil Gunn's *Whisky and Scotland* (1935), Edwin Muir's *Scottish Journey* (1935), Compton Mackenzie's *Catholicism and Scotland* (1936), Lewis Grassie Gibbon/Hugh MacDiarmid's *Scottish Scene* (1934), Eric Linklater's *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1935) and Willa Muir's *Mrs Grundy in Scotland* (1936). All of these share with the political writings two basic concerns: What is wrong with Scotland and what can we do about it? In his essay "'Facts' and 'Vision' in Scottish Writing of the 1920s and 1930s", the German critic Edmund Stegmaier comments on the characteristic manner in which Scottish intellectuals begin with a survey of the realities of contemporary Scotland, then proceed with a consideration of how Scots might move beyond their depressing present:

My enumeration of terms such as "stir up", "rouse", and "awaken" indicates that these writers are not content merely to draw the line after presenting the factual side of things. Precisely because of the depressing statistical data they demand that the Scottish people discover a new consciousness in the idea of a better future. And the writers themselves provide an impetus towards the fulfilment of this demand. (Stegmaier 1982: 72)

According to Stegmaier, this combination of a pessimistic picture of past and present and an optimistic vision of future revival and renaissance is unique to Scottish inter-war writing (Stegmaier 1982: 73).

In addition to the potential for political revival, most Renaissance writers engaged with Scottish national mythology. As mentioned in my discussion of Benedict Anderson, the visibility of the nation is central to the imagined community, and one way to make a country more visible is via the promotion of certain images of the nation. The classical examples are national landscapes or history, but as the Scottish Renaissance stressed, not all icons will do. Nineteenth-century Scotland had been presented to the world through the novels of Walter Scott, and although he had made the nation instantly recognisable, he essentially confined Scottishness to the past. In response to that, the inter-war authors aimed to make Scottish identity a concern of the present. Such a project relied on a deconstruction of past stereotypes as well as the construction of a contemporary mythology, and it is typical of much inter-war literature. With reference to this, five pre-occupations seem particularly relevant. They are Scottish geography, history, religion, language and literature, and I believe it is possible to use them to approach the Renaissance vision more generally. The following is a brief examination of



the individual motifs in relation to the idea of the imagined community as it comes across in Scottish Renaissance writing.

*Geography:*

Possibly, the most central aspect of nationhood is the concept of territory. In *National Identity* Anthony Smith comments on the relationship between a people and its landscape:

[The nation] is, in the first place, a predominantly spatial or territorial conception. According to this view, nations must possess compact, well-defined territories. People and territory must, as it were, belong to each other, in the way that the early Dutch, for example, saw themselves as formed by the high seas and as forging (literally) the earth they possessed and made their own. (A. Smith 1991: 9)

The sense of belonging as such was not a problem for the Scottish Renaissance movement for the survival of the border as an administrative boundary ensured that a sense of Scotland as a distinct, geographical space prevailed. What was debatable was the question of which landscape was the most representative. In the nineteenth century, Walter Scott had imagined a Scotland dominated by dramatic Highland scenery, whereas the Kailyard novelists preferred a nation composed of pastoral Lowland villages, but neither representation satisfied the moderns. Scotland, they would argue, could not be contained within such imagery which simplified what was to the inter-war authors a very complex landscape. Against the distortions of the past, they therefore placed a picture of the nation which, in their opinion, was more true to the reality of inter-war Scotland. In *Scotland and the Scots*, journalist William Power reflects on that process:

The majority of the books on Scotland that are written by Scots are inspired by a genuine love of Scotland, a genuine concern for the welfare and true honour of her people, and a genuine desire for her national advancement. The average Scottish writer no longer views his own country through the narrow and distorting media of feudal romanticism, Kailyard sentimentalism, or Imperialist insularity. He tries to behold her as she really is, in the light of her own natural and human history, of world history and of foreign travel; and he finds that she is far more wonderful than any of her lovers have ever dreamt. It is the Scots themselves who have still most to learn about Scotland. (Power 1934: 30-31)

The purpose of this paragraph is clearly educational. After such introductory remarks, Power guides his reader on a topographical journey through Scotland, for to know



Scotland is to love it. His aims are nationalist in the sense that he assumes that Scots, once they realise what natural wealth lies within their reach, will want to erase from the map of Scotland the black blot that is the Industrial Belt in order to repopulate the areas that had been emptied in the previous century. A similar understanding of the nation as a predominantly rustic space characterises much of the period literature. Although writers such as Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir engaged with the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation in their writings, they never seem comfortable in their rendition of an urban environment, which has inspired criticism of the Renaissance vision. Prominent among these is Christopher Whyte, whose 1990 essay "Imagining the City" holds the inter-war writers to account for their apparent failure to come to terms with a modern scene (Whyte 1990: 318-19). At the heart of Whyte's attack is the argument that Glasgow was neglected in Scottish Renaissance literature, which is true in the case of Eric Linklater, Compton Mackenzie and William Power, who all imagined the Scottish national landscape as a rural space. Whyte employs a narrow definition of the Scottish Renaissance, however, which not only excludes the likes of James Barke, George Blake and Catherine Carswell, who all employed urban settings, but fails to acknowledge that Gibbon, Muir and MacDiarmid all commented on the industrial city. In his 1934 travelogue *The Heart of Scotland*, George Blake thus stresses that it would be wrong to ignore the industrial regions: "The Coatbridge man stands with the crofter of Skye and the shepherd of Peebles as a representative Scot in his own right" (Blake 1934: 45).

Blake's insistence on the Coatbridge worker as equally representative of Scottish experience as the more traditional icons of Scottishness is connected to the ideological construction of Scotland as a unity in diversity. The idea behind this vision is that the exclusion of any single fragment will result in a distorted image of the nation, and that it is crucial to incorporate all aspects of Scottishness. In his preface to *The Heart of Scotland*, Eric Linklater observes:

To find the mind's construction in the face is often a pretty exercise in ingenuity. To seek the Scottish mind's construction in Scotland's face is sometimes an exercise in piety, sometimes in pathology: piety if you confine your examination to the romantic forehead of the Highlands and the pastoral complexion of the Lowlands, pathology if you see only municipal architecture and the industrial belt. You should look at both: on the one hand beauty in abundance, on the other scar-tissue in superfluity. (Linklater in Blake 1934: v)

The notion of Scotland as a unity-in-diversity urges the Renaissance writers to consider all elements of the national landscape. A concern with rural Scotland, in contrast, is symptomatic of a focus on part of the nation only, which offers no improvement on the nineteenth-century misrepresentations. On an ideological level, the unity-in-diversity approach represents an idea of a Scotland large enough to contain all difference. It accepts industrial Scotland as well as rural Scotland, the Highlands as well as the Lowlands, because of its aim to fuse all opposites into one. Such a vision of Scotland is very idealist and hard to sustain. More often than not, the celebration of multitudes collapses into mere praise of the Scottish countryside as Linklater underlines in his parody *Magnus Merriman* where Magnus's great epic of revival ends up in literary failure and the poet's return to Orkney (Linklater 1934/1990: 263-64).

### *History:*

If the concept of a national space necessarily comes first, the notion of a shared past, a national history, is the second concern of a would-be nationalism. "[The] earth in question cannot be just anywhere", Anthony Smith emphasises in *Nation and Nationalism*: "It is, and must be, the 'historic' land, the 'homeland', the 'cradle' of our people" (A. Smith 1991: 9). As with geography, not any history will do. "Few things cry so urgently for rewriting as does Scots history", Lewis Grassie Gibbon declared in his essay "The Antique Scene" (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 19), and if the amount of attention paid to historical questions in the inter-war literature is anything to go by, Gibbon's contemporaries seem to have agreed. In order to achieve what they considered an objective treatment of the past, the Renaissance writers found it necessary to challenge the nineteenth-century accounts of Scottish history. One of the primary targets was Walter Scott. In his historical fiction, Scott had centred on romantic episodes such as the 1745 Jacobite Rising in *Waverley* and the Covenanting Wars in *Old Mortality*, which according to the inter-war generation had resulted in an overtly sentimental and unbalanced picture of Scottish history. Heroic and colourful as they might seem, these events were both synonymous with civil war, poverty and disruption, which is to say that they presented an image of a divided nation. Against such historical divisions, Scott would place the stability of his own age. His fiction thus juxtaposed a violent past and an enlightened present in a manner that indirectly advertised the 1707 Union as the incident in Scottish history that had brought an end to the disruption and enabled the nation to prosper. Scott's Renaissance critics found this reading problematic on two



accounts: on the one hand, it undermined the case for Scottish sovereignty in the sense that it presented pre-Union Scotland as a nation ridden by civil war and violence; on the other, it reduced Scottish history to a few stereotypes such as Bonnie Prince Charlie, Mary Queen of Scots and Bonnie Dundee. In the literature, the attack on Scott was accompanied by an attempt on behalf of the inter-war generation to construct a history that was more to their liking. In *Scotland and the Scots* William Power describes the process of historical revaluation:

At the back of all [the younger writers] write is a critical synthesis. By slow degrees they are scaling off from the picture of Scotland all the spurious, excrescent Scotlands that have been imposed upon it since the days of Mary Stuart and John Knox - the Scotlands of fanatics, sadists, flunkeys, renegades, careerists, romanticists, sentimentalists, buffoons, snobs, exploiters, hucksters, game-preservers, and 'heids o' depairtments' - and revealing the essential, the European Scotland, the Scotland that is a product of immemorial racial experience, of authentic spiritual and intellectual processes, of geographical position, of soil and climate, and of scenery. (Power 1934: 26)

Where nineteenth-century writers such as Scott had viewed human development as a continuous progress towards a present climax, the inter-war intellectuals read Scottish history in terms of decline. This reflects a post-war pessimism that manifested itself throughout the Western World in such works as H. G. Wells' *An Outline of History* (1920) and Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1922-26). Scotland appears to have been hit particularly hard, however. During the previous decades, Scots had grown accustomed to the idea of the British Empire as the height of evolution, and now the reality of inter-war Scotland, hit by economic depression and spiritual disillusionment, undermined such comfort. The Renaissance alternative to nineteenth-century historiography offered little consolation: Scotland had once prospered as an independent nation. Unfortunately, the nation's good fortune was brought to an end by the Reformation, the 1707 Union and the Industrial Revolution, which in different ways shattered the basis of the country and hastened the process of degeneration. Highland Clearances and the horrors of the World War led the Scots into the modern age, which offered little comfort for a nation that was politically, economically, socially and culturally bankrupt. "The first fact about the Scot is that he is a man eclipsed", George Malcolm Thomson writes in *Caledonia*: "The Scots are a dying people" (Thomson 1927: 10). Together with Thomson's *Scotland That Distressed Area*, Andrew Dewar Gibb's *Scotland in Eclipse* reinforces such conclusions through its insistence on the



dismal conditions of contemporary Scotland. Yet there is hope for Scotland within the Renaissance vision. In the discussion of Scottish non-fiction I referred to previously (p. 36), Edmund Stegmaier noted the visionary qualities of Scottish inter-war literature, and Eric Linklater's conclusion to *The Lion and the Unicorn* proves his point:

History, moreover, would seem to be on the side of the Nationalists, for a quality of resurgence has been so regular a characteristic of Scotland as to appear, if not inevitable, at least normal. Scotsmen have, in recent memory, reclaimed elsewhere a poorer soil than many deer-forests, enriched less noble rivers than the Clyde, and ruled people as intractable as Lowland Presbyterians. If some breath of wisdom decides us to do for ourselves what we have done for others, Scotland will again play a part in the world, and find for its own people a worthy and congenial life at home (Linklater 1935a: 192)

Though conservative in outlook, Linklater's vision is representative of Scottish Renaissance literature as a whole. Scotland had experienced a Golden Age before the disruption caused by the Reformation, the Union and industrialism. It might still enjoy another Golden Age, and whether in ideological terms, they approached their subjects from a conservative, a liberal, a nationalist or a socialist angle, the inter-war generation saw it as their duty to steer the country in the right direction. Accordingly, most Renaissance accounts of Scottish history culminate in a call for the nation to put a halt to the decay and participate in the building of a new Scotland.

### *Religion:*

More paradoxical in relation to the issue of nationhood is the Renaissance preoccupation with religion. When the boundaries of the religious community are identical with the borders of the nation, a communal faith may strengthen the national sense of belonging. When on the contrary, religion cuts across a nation's historical and geographical limits, the integrity of the nation suffers in consequence. Eric Hobsbawm observes in *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*:

[Religion] is a paradoxical cement for proto-nationalism, and indeed for modern nationalism, which has usually...treated it with considerable reserve as a force which could challenge the nation's "monopoly" claim to its members' loyalty. In any case genuinely tribal religions normally operate on too small a scale for modern nationalities, and resist much broadening out. On the other hand the world religions which were invented at various times between the sixth century BC and the seventh century AD, are universal by definition, and therefore designed to fudge ethnic, linguistic, political and other differences. (Hobsbawm 1995: 68)

Though I am reluctant to apply Hobsbawm's terms "tribal" and "universal" to the churches in Scotland, I think his argument is relevant in a Scottish context.

Protestantism, when introduced in Scotland in 1560, was larger than the nation itself and ignored the borders that had hitherto distinguished Catholic Scotland from Anglican England. Catholicism, in contrast, in the form that survived the Reformation, was marginalised to such a degree that it could no longer unite a nation.

Like the work of older writers such as Robert Burns and James Hogg, Scottish Renaissance literature is characterised by a hostile attitude towards the Calvinist Kirk of Scotland. The chapter in Scottish history subject to most scrutiny by the moderns was the Reformation, for the inter-war writers claimed that Calvinism had split the national experience in two and consequently undermined Scottish nationhood. The most prominent exponent of such views was Edwin Muir, who employed much of his criticism in a campaign against the legacy of John Knox, although Fionn Mac Colla, Eric Linklater and Compton Mackenzie voiced similar concerns. At the centre of the debate was the series of non-fictional works planned by Hugh MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassie Gibbon in 1934. The *Voice of Scotland* books include such publications as Edwin Muir's *Scott and Scotland*, Neil Gunn's *Whisky and Scotland* and Willa Muir's *Mrs Grundy in Scotland*, but even if the contributors were asked to focus on different aspects of Scottish life, all but Gunn used the opportunity to tackle the question of Calvinism. The general structure of these works reads as follows: firstly, the authors evoke Scotland as it was before the Reformation whether it be symbolised by the grandeur of Scottish cathedrals (Mackenzie), the beauty of Scots poetry (Power) or the integrity of the kingdom (Linklater). Then the writers turn to the Reformation, which comes across as an event that physically and spiritually wrecked the country. They may consider the fanaticism of the Covenanting wars in the seventeenth century or the connection between Calvinism and capitalism in the eighteenth century, but they inevitably end with a picture of the contemporary wasteland – a Scotland whose spirit has been strangled by the Calvinist creed of predestination and whose body is wasted by a capitalist ethos inspired by the Kirk.

A key argument in the Renaissance criticism is that the introduction of Calvinism destroyed Scottish art. Before 1560, the Scottish nation had enjoyed a spell of prosperity during the reign of James IV. That period in Scottish history is commonly referred to as the Golden Age, and it is associated with the poetry of William Dunbar and Robert



Henryson, who successfully combined native concerns with a European outlook. Such wealth was dependent upon the twin influences of Scottish tradition and European ideas. They were present in the fifteenth century when Scotland had been a strong, independent country with sufficient resources to engage in an exchange of culture with the Continent; after the Reformation, the Renaissance writers claimed, such advantageous conditions disappeared, because Protestantism, on the one hand, severed Scottish ties with Catholic France, while on the other, it allied the Puritan element in England and the Calvinist Kirk of Scotland. In return for a closer relationship with their Southern neighbour, the Scots gained English manners and an English Bible, which in the long run reduced Scottish difference. To such disadvantages, the Renaissance writers added the impact of Calvinism on the Scottish mind. The world-view of Catholic Scotland was perceived as a balanced philosophy sympathetic to artistic accomplishment. In contrast, the Reformation discouraged creativity because it had turned the attention away from God. Victor MacClure observes in *Scotland's Inner Man*:

For the reformers to have had any eye for beauty would have been to imitate the luxurious clergy they were displacing. The Puritanism of the new ministers and their flocks, destroying everything ecclesiastical that savoured of idolatry, smashed more than the artistic embellishments of the churches and abbeys. It smashed all the culture, and all the artistic aspirations that were already growing in the Scots mind. There was to be no beauty but the beauty of Holiness, a beauty of bone structure with no sweet curving flesh to cover it. (MacClure 1935: 101)

The fact that MacClure's comments appear in a book on Scottish cookery underlines how widespread such a thesis was. The majority of Scottish intellectuals thus rejected the Calvinist legacy because they thought it restricted their imagination and outlawed their quest for aesthetic beauty. In addition, some argued that Calvinism was hostile to Scottish nationhood because it had contributed to the over-all decline of Scotland, but such a connection is problematic. Although creative writers tended to be critical of Presbyterianism, other inter-war intellectuals such as Andrew Dewar Gibb and George Malcolm Thomson accepted Calvinism as part of the national heritage, and they were supported by most contributors to *The Scots Observer*, which paradoxically functioned as a mouthpiece for the Kirk as well as for the Scottish Literary Renaissance.

*Language:*



Language has traditionally been acknowledged as a fundamental aspect of national identity. One of Benedict Anderson's central claims in *Imagined Communities* is that there is a connection between the rise of the nation-state in fifteenth-century Europe and the spread of vernacular languages such as English, French and German (Anderson 1991: 37-41). In the nineteenth century it was generally accepted that the success of a would-be nation depended on the strength of its linguistic heritage, which made a recovery of the Norwegian and Finnish tongues a key concern for the national movements in Norway and Finland. Around 1900, Scottish intellectuals were somewhat more pessimistic with regard to the future of Scots. In his *Literary History of Scotland* (1903), J. H. Millar comments on the prospects for literary Scots in poetry:

Its resources as regards verse appear to be exhausted, and all its conventions have been worn to a thread. Everything has the air of a more or less – and generally a less – skilful imitation of Burns. Burns himself, as we have seen, was not “original” in the sense of having founded a new school of poetry. He was rather the consummation of an old one; and for that very reason he presents an insuperable obstacle to the triumph of those who also would fain be disciples. It was easy for him to borrow from Ramsay and from Fergusson, and to improve upon what he borrowed. It is also possible for later generations to borrow from Burns; but who is to improve upon him? (Millar 1903: 679-80)

The Scottish Renaissance changed that. Its representatives realised that Scots, as a literary language, had ceased to function as a medium for original thought by the time Millar came up with his conclusions, but refused to accept that the vernacular could not be restored to its former position. As a result, one of the inter-war revival's greatest triumphs is its recovery of the Scots language.

Many Renaissance writers were preoccupied with the question of whether or not the vernacular would work as a vehicle for modern art. Although it had survived into the nineteenth century, the use of Scots had been restricted to rural Scotland, which is to say that it hardly seemed compatible with a modernist agenda. In early twentieth century, North East poets Violet Jacob, Charles Murray and Marion Angus tried to change the attitude to the vernacular through the employment of Scots in their writings. Their approach was not radical enough for Hugh MacDiarmid, however, who campaigned fiercely against the use of Scots in *The Aberdeen Free Press* between December, 1921, and January, 1922 (MacDiarmid 1984a: 749-56). Soon thereafter, the poet realised that it might be desirable for the particular branch of the modernist movement that was the Scottish Renaissance to employ the vernacular, which enabled the writer to underline

the native aspects of Scottish tradition, whilst challenging the English hegemony. He recognised that Scottish authors were caught between a nationalist and a modernist impulse, and the only way to satisfy both was through a modernisation of the vernacular. Accordingly, he developed what became known as “Synthetic Scots”. In order to write modern poetry in Scots, MacDiarmid found it necessary to extend the vocabulary available to him. Through the reintroduction of words from earlier stages of the Scots language, as well as various regional glosses, he developed a linguistic medium that allowed him to transcend provincialism and engage with modern ideas. The poet’s contemporaries were enthusiastic about his departure from Scottish tradition. In “Towards a Scottish Renaissance”, which is included as a preface to the Carcanet edition of *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, Alexander McGill singles out MacDiarmid as the key figure in the revival on account of his Scots lyrics (MacDiarmid 1926/1995: 3-4). In *Literature and Oatmeal* William Power writes:

The real difficulty is the break-through of the Doric from the realm of pure description and simple emotion into the realm of pure ideas. MacDiarmid achieves it now and then, but the rushing flood of his thought swirls him back into a stream of English, where only an occasional Scots locution reminds us of the Doric intention. Yet the spirit of the poems is Scots throughout, because MacDiarmid is the most vitally representative of living Scots. At times he can be clumsy, abusive, unjust, and irritatingly perverse. But he is never for one moment dull, because he is always his own amazing self. He is more thought-provoking than any of his English contemporaries. He has managed to bomb the Scots mind out of its bourgeois-Victorian funk-holes, and make it take to the open. (Power 1935: 183)

In the light of the Renaissance writing as a whole, Power is interesting on two accounts: on the one hand, he praises MacDiarmid for his contribution to the vernacular revival. Such praise is perhaps not surprising, given that the use of Scots was an efficient way to increase the visibility of Scotland, and that it was equally celebrated with reference to the prose of Lewis Grassie Gibbon. More significant is Power’s insistence on MacDiarmid’s ability to convey strong Scottish loyalties even when he employs a minimum of Scots only. If MacDiarmid could successfully channel his Scottishness through a medium that is only vaguely coloured by the vernacular, little would seem to prevent other writers from obtaining similar effects within Standard English.

In addition to the vernacular and Standard English, the inter-war writers accepted Gaelic as part of their national heritage. The suppression of Highland culture in the past meant that the language had been confined to a minority, but activists such as Ruairidh



Erskine of Marr actively promoted a re-Gaelification of Scotland (Erskine 1931: 31-34). Most Renaissance authors were happy with a more passive recognition of Gaelic as one of the languages of Scottish literature, however. As argued by Erskine in *Changing Scotland*, Gaelic had suffered a decline comparable to Lowland Scots, and it needed development in order to become a suitable vehicle for modern ideas (Erskine 1931: 32-33). The implication was that Gaelic could be extended in a manner similar to MacDiarmid's reworking of Lowland Scots, and such a fusion of modern thought and Gaelic tradition was realised with Sorley Maclean's poetry of the 1930s and 1940s.

### *Literature:*

Although his/her choice of language appears to be the most obvious contribution the creative writer makes to the construction of the imagined community, culture more generally can be employed in a nationalist campaign. In *Nations and Nationalism* Ernest Gellner stresses how in the modern age it has become common to associate nationhood with a continuous, national tradition:

Culture is no longer merely the adornment, confirmation and legitimation of a social order which was also sustained by harsher and coercive constraints; culture is now the necessary shared medium, the life-blood or perhaps rather the minimal shared atmosphere, within which alone the members of the society can breathe and survive and produce. For a given society, it must be one in which they can *all* breathe and speak and produce; so it must be the *same* culture. Moreover, it must now be a great or high (literate, training-sustained) culture, and it can no longer be a diversified, locality-tied, illiterate little culture or tradition. (Gellner 1983: 37-38)

The Scottish Renaissance authors were ambitious in their attempt to make literature participate in the national awakening. In their prose and poetry, the authors expressed ideas that embraced modernism as well as Scottishness, and they promoted their art as a departure from the old-fashioned, provincial outlook associated with nineteenth-century Scotland. Before they were able to declare their revival a Second Golden Age, however, the moderns saw a need to part with their more immediate past. In *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (1926) Hugh MacDiarmid stressed that "Scotland to-day possesses at least ten poets superior to all except the greatest ten it has had in the whole course of its literary history" (MacDiarmid 1926/1995: 114). Other writers appear to have been motivated by similar concerns as much of the inter-war criticism denounces such Scottish icons as Walter Scott, Robert Burns and J. M. Barrie.



The Renaissance version of Scottish literary history reads similarly to the interpretation of history as a whole. It begins with the Golden Age of Scottish letters in the fifteenth century when drama, poetry and other forms of the arts thrived. In 1560 the Reformation initiated a process of decline in the quality and the quantity of the arts. The decay culminated in the nineteenth century when Scottish literature reached its low point with the Victorian Kailyard, but hopefully the tide was now turning and the inter-war revival would prove a renaissance in the true sense of the word. In a 1924 contribution to *The Glasgow Herald* William Power appeals to the moderns:

Europe, wounded and weakened and disillusioned by the war, is a prey to parasitical influences of morbidity, spiritualism, freakishness, pseudo-psychology, and deadly materialism. Her aeroplanes cleave the clouds, but her soul remains below. Once again, as two centuries ago, after the dreadful wars of Louis XIV, she looks around for springs of healing. May she not find them once again in the waters called forth by Scottish poets from the rocks of their native land? (Power 1924: 4)

Although Power's rhetoric is wonderful in its universality, most Renaissance writers settled for the more manageable task of a critical revaluation of their literary heritage. To receive the heaviest rebuke were the moderns' most immediate predecessors, the creators of the Kailyard and the Celtic Twilight. The nineteenth-century writers were charged with parochialism, narrow-mindedness and sentimentalism, which according to the Scottish Renaissance had resulted in a misrepresentation of Scottish life in literature. The legacy of Walter Scott caused more problems for the moderns. On the one hand, his writings related to Scottish affairs, which was positive in the light of the inter-war insistence on Scottishness. On the other, his version of history presented the 1707 Union between Scotland and England in a positive light, which was at odds with the nationalist concerns of the 1920s and 1930s. The criticism of Burns, finally, is the hardest to understand. Standard allegations of parochialism and populism occur, but the problem appears to have been the uses Burn's poetry was put to rather than the writings themselves. In the opening of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, MacDiarmid therefore denounces the Burns Federation, Burns Clubs and middle-class Burnsites, then moves on to proclaim "A greater Christ, a greater Burns" as the future hope for Scotland (MacDiarmid 1926/1987: 12).

With the Kailyard, national icons such as Scott and Burns and most Scottish literature after the Reformation dismissed, the moderns would turn to pre-Reformation writing for inspiration. Hugh MacDiarmid evoked William Dunbar, whereas Edwin

Muir preferred Robert Henryson, but there was a consensus among Scottish writers of the 1920s and 1930s that the author who sought examples of a genuine, native tradition, should turn to the fifteenth century. Eric Linklater writes in *The Lion and the Unicorn*:

In the first James Scotland had a king whom Chaucer had taught to be a poet, and the fourth James, himself a scholar and a musician, had for subjects the great makars, Dunbar and Henryson and Gavin Douglas. With them to use it, the Scottish tongue acquired an amazing strength. The makars have commonly been called Chaucerians, but in some ways they were rather pre-Elizabethans. Like Marlowe's, their vocabulary had the seemingly inexhaustible and ever-growing riches of a new-found Golconda. They had the many-sidedness of men whose minds were alive in all quarters. They had such a frank delight in their art that, though an art of such high accomplishment, it was still a plaything. It was the art of the Renaissance, and under James IV the Renaissance made a brave start in Scotland. (Linklater 1935a: 111-12)

An awareness of such past accomplishments, the moderns argued, allowed Scottish authors to reach beyond years of provincialism and narrow-mindedness to grasp the universals they desired.

With reference to Benedict Anderson's four principles for nationhood, I will claim that the Scottish Renaissance attempted to construct a national mythology on all levels. Central to the project is the *reimagination* of Scotland. Since 1707 Scots had learnt to think of themselves as a small part of a larger whole, the united kingdom of Great Britain, but the new generation stressed that it need not necessarily be so; that a reconsideration of Scottish geography and history might prove it possible to see Scotland as a nation in its own right. The *limitation* of the nation is less significant. There were intellectuals in the thirties who argued that the English and the Irish populations should be excluded and Scotland only include those who could claim direct descent from an elusive tribe of prehistoric Scots. Yet they were a minority as most Renaissance writers were more concerned with the overcoming of old divides than the construction of new ones. The third question of *sovereignty*, in contrast, is at the heart of the discussion because of the moderns' close association with political nationalism. Not surprisingly, much of the controversy over Scottish history, Calvinism and literature was meant to prove Scotland's right to self-determination. In the Renaissance perspective, the Golden Age of Scottish history had ended when the Reformation introduced an English Bible and initiated the process of anglicisation. Scottish Calvinism hastened the decline because of its discouragement of the arts, while native Scottish tradition was



eroded by the closer relationship between Scottish and English culture. Hence the inter-war Renaissance would argue that Scotland was once independent and prosperous, that the nation was impoverished because of its lost nationhood, and that only a return to Scottish self-determination might save the nation. A sense of *community*, finally, is called for in much Renaissance propaganda. The unity-in-diversity approach to Scottish geography, as well as the attempts to follow Scottish history back to a Golden Age before the years of civil war and disruption, evoke the dream of a united Scotland, where all the individual parts perceive themselves as members of one family. To conclude: what was undertaken in Scottish literature in the 1920s and 1930s was a grand nation-building scheme, which was meant to teach the Scots to think of their country in terms of an imaginable community and indirectly, provide an ideological basis for nationalism.

## Beyond the Renaissance

A number of common features unite most Scottish writing of the inter-war years. On the broadest level, Scottish authors participate in a modernist reaction against an older, pre-war civilisation, which involves the denunciation of nineteenth-century morals, manners and taste. This criticism may be read as an attempt on behalf of the moderns to create a space for their art, for many literary eras started out with a reaction by younger writers against the conventions of their literary forebears. With reference to Scottish issues in particular, the Renaissance writings are characterised by a concern over the state of the nation and a regenerative vision of the new Scotland that needs to be built. How did it ever come to this, the writers ask, and their answer is denationalisation: Scotland's loss of nationhood had led to the country's physical and spiritual decline, and only a rise in national consciousness might save Scotland from premature death. The Renaissance thesis is backed in the literature by the revaluation of Scottish geography, history, religion, literature and language, and it is such thematic parallels that make it possible to talk of one literary movement, *the Scottish Literary Renaissance*. The problem with such terminology is that it ignores the diversity within the group. The authors associated with the revival were individuals before they became connected with any specific grouping, which raises the question of whether indeed the notion of a Scottish Renaissance is viable outside the mind of the literary critic. With reference to modernism as a whole, Randall Stevenson claims in *Modernist Fiction* that



unlike other contemporary movements such as Imagism, Futurism or Vorticism - modernism involved very little direct association of the writers involved. It was never a movement fostered through participants' contacts or collective agreement about aims, goals, ideas or styles. Modernism is a critical construct, a recognition, some years after writers completed the works involved, of substantial similarities, even a collective identity, in the initiatives they took and the styles and concerns which they made a priority. (Stevenson 1992: 8)

Though the artists of the Scottish Literary Renaissance all share the ambition to revitalise the nation and thus represent a more cohesive group than modernism in general, there are differences of opinions that have been obscured by my attempt to present the Renaissance as a unified movement. In order to foreground such diversity, I will proceed with an examination of four representative authors who in different ways engaged with the questions of Scotland and Scottishness. I have chosen to focus on Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir, because they are the most central in relation to the thematic concerns of my particular discussion. This is not to suggest that they equal the Scottish Renaissance, which embraced a multitude of voices from different social, ethnic and regional backgrounds. Arguably, their ideas of Scotland were among the most influential, however, while their disagreements with regard to the question of nationalism probably constitute the most disruptive factor within the Renaissance group. In the second part of my analysis, I will therefore concentrate on the image of the nation that emerges from the work of MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir. In some areas, I expect them to share the concerns I identified in the "Voice of Scotland" section; in others, they may deviate from the general consensus in order to pursue their own interests. Just as Randall Stevenson characterised modernism as the meeting of agendas that did not necessarily cohere, I believe it is the sum of such similarities and differences which constitutes the Scottish Literary Renaissance. Or as literary historian David Perkins argues in *Is Literary History Possible?*: "We must perceive a past age as relatively unified if we are to write literary history; we must perceive it as highly diverse if what we write is to represent it plausibly" (Perkins 1992: 27).

## **Part Two**

### **Four Visions of Scotland**

## Introductory

Where in the initial part of my discussion, I tried to show how on the most general level Scottish culture contributed to the construction of the imagined community in the 1920s and 1930s, I want to use the second part to examine four specific visions of Scotland. I have chosen to focus on Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir because of their central position in Scottish inter-war literature. In their writings, the themes of history, geography, religion, language and literature recur, which underlines the authors' engagement with the critical revaluation of the nation. Yet I have decided not to follow these motifs slavishly in order to avoid thematic concerns overshadowing the diversity among the writers. In consequence, I shall postpone my reflections on the artists' stance on the Renaissance ideology in a wider sense until my concluding chapter and, for the time being, consider only the themes that appear most relevant in relation to each particular writer.

I have structured my discussion of the authors on the basis of chronology as well as their position within the national movement. I will begin with Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978) because it was his call for a Scottish revival that in the 1920s launched the process of revaluation. In the 1930s, the poet's attraction to extreme political ideas such as fascism and communism led to his expulsion from the National Party, whereas his contacts with fellow-writers suffered as a result of his 1933 withdrawal to Whalsay. Nevertheless, he remained loyal to his concept of Scotland and is possibly the most idealistic of the four. The examination of MacDiarmid is followed by the chapter on Neil Gunn (1891-1973). Gunn was born a year earlier than MacDiarmid, yet it was the poet, who in the 1920s directed the Highland writer towards the literary mainstream, and it is uncertain whether Gunn would have become so important a spokesperson for the Renaissance, had he lacked such stimulation at this crucial moment in his career. My third writer, Lewis Grassie Gibbon (1901-35), stands out because of his late arrival on the Scottish scene as well as his premature death. With regard to literature, he shared with MacDiarmid an interest in the vernacular, while his views on political nationalism are more reminiscent of those of Edwin Muir. Finally, Edwin Muir (1887-1959) is the author who is most critical of the nationalist principles behind the literary movement, which is why I have placed him at the end of my discussion. In terms of chronology, that may seem problematic, for Muir was five years MacDiarmid's senior, four years



Gunn's. Yet there appears to be no other appropriate place for him, when his attitude to the Scottish revival is taken into account. As a result, my survey of Scottish Renaissance literature begins with Hugh MacDiarmid's call for a national awakening in 1922; it ends with Edwin Muir's dismissal of nationalism in the 1930s.

## On seeing Scotland whole: Hugh MacDiarmid 1919-43

In the early 1920s, when he first set out to revive Scottish culture, Hugh MacDiarmid appeared certain that it was possible to change the public attitude to all matters Scottish. “Let Scotland go forward boldly as Belgium did, as Ireland has done, to the creation of its natural national literature”, he declared in the 1922 piece “Scotland and Belgium” from *The Dunfermline Press*, which indicates that the questions of culture and nationality were interconnected from the beginning (MacDiarmid 1922/1996b: 30). MacDiarmid continued with a call for action: “The difficulties to be overcome are largely those which the Belgians overcame and Scotsmen can surmount them in much the same way if they are sufficiently set upon it. Where there’s a will there’s a way” (MacDiarmid 1922/1996b: 30). The tone of “Scotland and Belgium” is representative of the confidence with which MacDiarmid launched his programme for a Scottish Renaissance in the twenties. Inspired by the examples of other small nations such as Belgium and Ireland, he believed that Scotland, too, might enjoy a cultural revival, and that the merits of such were so obvious that he could only be met with sympathy by his fellow-Scots. Twenty years later, the writer seems to have lost his original faith in the Scottish nation. In his autobiography, *Lucky Poet* from 1943, he characterises his position in inter-war Scotland as follows:

To mix my metaphors from the animal world, my function in Scotland during the past twenty to thirty years has been that of the cat-fish that vitalizes the other torpid denizens of the aquarium. And what a job! Since the Union with England, Scotland’s has been simply the role of caterpillar-grub stung into immobility by devouring wasp; a paralysis that will certainly last the lives of 99 per cent. of all Scots now over forty years of age, and was complete and lifelong in the lives of nearly 100 per cent. of their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers. (MacDiarmid 1943: xv)

MacDiarmid’s words are bitter. Although he admits he has made some progress among the younger generations, most Scots have been untouched by his campaign for national regeneration, which leaves him wondering whether Scotland has indeed been worth his efforts. Where in 1922, the author had been positive with regard to the prospects of a national revival, he appears less certain by 1943. While the young MacDiarmid was confident in his ability to affect change, the older MacDiarmid realises that he has been unable to transform the outlook of his compatriots. Between 1922 and 1943, the poet

has moved from optimism towards scepticism regarding the prospects of the Scottish Renaissance, and in order to explain such a development, it is necessary to examine his relationship with the national movement more closely.

Hugh MacDiarmid's earliest declaration of a life-long commitment to the Scottish cause occurred in a 1916 letter to his former schoolmaster George Ogilvie: "I shall come back and start a new Neo-Catholic movement. I shall enter heart and body and soul into a new Scots Nationalist propaganda" (MacDiarmid 1916/1984a: 14). The initial reference to Catholicism is interesting in the light of the development of T. S. Eliot and Edwin Muir, who became increasingly preoccupied with religious questions towards the end of their careers. Yet it is as a Scottish poet and propagandist, not as a spiritual revivalist, that MacDiarmid made his impact on inter-war Scotland. Although he had already voiced his concern with the national question in 1916, it is likely that the author was influenced by the climate in Scotland which was generally favourable to nationalism in the early 1920s. As I discussed in my historical survey, nationalist organisations, which had been suppressed by the war, re-emerged from around 1919 (p. 21 ff.). The established Press would print accounts of the fortunes, or misfortunes, of the Home Rule campaign, which indicates that there was an interest in the issue among the population as a whole. Such an atmosphere may have convinced MacDiarmid that Scotland was ready for a new kind of Scottish literature. Where prior to 1922 he had maintained a balance between the work of established writers such as John Buchan and Neil Munro and contemporary poetry in the *Northern Numbers* anthologies, he became more radical in approach after his launch of *The Scottish Chapbook* in 1922. In the first editorial, MacDiarmid explains why he had found a redirection of Scottish literature necessary:

In my opinion, then, for several generations Scottish literature has neither seen nor heard nor understood what was taking place around it. For that reason it remains a dwarf among giants. Scottish writers have been terrified even to appear inconstant to established conventions. (Good wine would have needed no "Bonnie Brier Bush".) They have stood still and consequently been left behind in technique and ideation. Meanwhile the Scottish nation has been radically transformed in temperament and tendency; Scottish life has been given a drastic reorientation, with the result that Scottish literature today is in no sense representative or adequate. (MacDiarmid 1922/1992: 4-5)

MacDiarmid's journals served two purposes. First of all, they were meant to provide an outlet for contemporary Scottish writers such as the poet himself, Neil Gunn, William



Soutar and Edwin Muir. As MacDiarmid later observed in his essay on Muir from *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (1926), the Scottish Press was too parochial for the criticism of Edwin Muir, who in the early 1920s was writing mainly for English and American magazines. The “interest in literature in Scotland is infantile”, MacDiarmid points out, “while Muir is a Pan-European intervening in the world-debate on its highest plane” (MacDiarmid 1926/1995: 93). MacDiarmid’s new Scotland could not afford to lose a talent like Muir, whose European outlook would introduce a much needed international element into Scottish culture. Accordingly, one of MacDiarmid’s primary motivations behind ventures such as *The Scottish Chapbook*, *The Scottish Nation* and *The Northern Review* was to offer a Scottish forum for Muir, and the latter’s contributions to these journals in the early 1920s show that the editor had some success in turning the attention of prominent Scottish intellectuals to national matters. In addition to the attempt to put Scotland back in focus, MacDiarmid’s publications were meant to prepare Scottish readers for a new kind of literature that was at once national and modern. In the seventh, eighth and ninth issues of *The Scottish Chapbook*, the editor developed his ideas into a “theory of Scots letters”, which stressed that the force behind the Scottish Literary Renaissance would be “the genius of our Vernacular” combined with the “newest and truest tendencies of human thought” (MacDiarmid 1923/1992: 19). Nationalism, internationalism and universalism were to meet in MacDiarmid’s programme for a national revival, in other words, as he demonstrated in an artistic sense with *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* from 1926.

From the beginning, Hugh MacDiarmid’s radical departure from the conventions of past generations attracted the attention of his countrymen. Contemporary reports and letters in establishment papers such as *The Glasgow Herald* imply that many were provoked by the writer’s manifestos, which encouraged young Scots to discard established institutions such as the Burns Federation, whereas his poetry proved too experimental for the general public. Nevertheless, the author’s calls for a cultural revival brought him in contact with other Scottish writers such as Neil Gunn, Helen B. Cruickshank and Edwin Muir, many of whom would play a central role in the development of Scottish culture in the years to come. In spite of an obvious, nationalist agenda, the poet primarily focused on culture in his writings until 1927, when he sent out *Albyn: or Scotland and the Future* as a retort to George Malcolm Thomson’s *Caledonia*. To some degree, the priorities of *Albyn* were determined by Thomson’s

pamphlet, which was political in content. If one compares the polemics from the first volume of *The Raucle Tongue*, the recently published anthologies of MacDiarmid's hitherto uncollected prose, with the content of the second, however, the pieces written prior to 1926 tend to be cultural in content, whereas they become more concerned with political, economic and social issues from around 1927. One example of that tendency is "Nationalism and Socialism", which was published in *The Scots Independent* in 1928. In the following extract, the author responds to a recent attack on Scottish nationalism by a John S. Clarke in the Labour weekly *Forward*, then stresses why nationalism must take priority over socialism:

Our purblind anti-national Scottish Socialists have, in fact, sacrificed Scottish Socialism to English requirements in the most irrational fashion. Socialism is not incompatible with Nationalism; there is nothing whatever to prevent the growth of Socialism in a Scottish Free State any more than in France or Germany – there is no reason to suppose that that growth would be slower in a Scottish Free State than under the present conditions of affairs – it all depends upon the Scottish people. It is absurd to say that Scottish Nationalism, therefore, is a capitalist dodge – or an anti-capitalist one – although it may well develop a tendency in the former direction for a time if Scottish Socialists persist in violent, vituperative, and insensate anti-Nationalism of the kind served up by Mr. Clarke. (MacDiarmid 1928/1997: 72)

This was written at a time in MacDiarmid's career when he was becoming increasingly involved with nationalist politics. In 1928 he was thus among the founding members of the National Party of Scotland.

Hugh MacDiarmid's position in Scotland altered in the early 1930s. As the economic recession struck Britain, the poet underwent a series of financial and emotional crises which eventually took him to the remote Shetland island of Whalsay in 1933 (Bold *MacDiarmid* 1990: 326). Although his exile may have been beneficial in an artistic sense, it cut him off from the circles he had frequented in the 1920s. Through letters, he maintained contact with writers such as Neil Gunn, Helen B. Cruickshank, Edwin Muir, Catherine Carswell and Lewis Grassie Gibbon, among others, but where he had previously been at the centre of affairs, he was now more of a spectator. His 1933 letters to Neil Gunn, in particular, suggest that he felt he was losing touch with Scottish life, while his attacks on the national movement implies a changing ideological outlook (MacDiarmid 1933/1984a: 249-50 and 252). In his prose, MacDiarmid remained as ferocious as ever. In the 1931 essay "English Ascendancy in British Literature" he turned from the celebration of native genius that had characterised *The Scottish*



*Chapbook* to a direct attack on the enemy. Yet his creative efforts no longer seemed to match such radicalism. *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, which MacDiarmid had announced in a 1926 letter as the “synthesis” to *A Drunk Man*’s “antithesis”, appeared in 1930 (MacDiarmid 1926/1984a: 91). Except in size, the sequel did not rival the accomplishment of the previous work, and even the author admitted it had been a relative failure:

As a whole I do not think [*Cencrastus*] is so completely achieved as my *Drunk Man*: nor did I succeed in working out my intention – indeed I deliberately departed from it, realising that I was not yet capable of that task, and that it was necessary first of all to get rid of all kinds of elements (not without their own values) which have been standing between me and my real job. I believe I’ve done that now; and can go ahead to a far bigger task. (MacDiarmid 1931/1984a: 457)

Throughout the thirties, MacDiarmid was looking for a voice that could express his ideas as effectively as the vernacular idiom of his early lyrics. At the same time, he was less concerned with the nationalist propaganda that had been so central to his writings of the 1920s. The Scottish Renaissance no longer seemed to be at the heart of his vision, which may be the consequence of his alienation from the national movement.

In 1928, the writer appeared on the same platform as John MacCormick, Compton Mackenzie and the Duke of Montrose in an attempt to boost R. B. Cunninghame Graham’s rectorial campaign at Glasgow University. The same year he was involved in the foundation of the National Party, which consolidated the connection between the new tendencies in Scottish culture and nationalist politics in the wider sense. As Richard Finlay points out in *Independent and Free*, MacDiarmid soon became associated with the fundamentalist wing of the National Party. “Whatever his literary merits, politics was not his forte”, Finlay argues: “[MacDiarmid] became a focal point for Celtic nationalism and he endeavoured to give ideological body to its romantic notions” (Finlay 1994a: 83). Partly as a result of his idealistic outlook, partly because of his role in the fascist Clann Albain organisation, 1933 brought an end to the poet’s activities within the National Party. In an attempt to accommodate more moderate nationalists, John MacCormick called for the expulsion of party radicals, and one of the first to go was MacDiarmid, whose Romantic commitment to Scotland was incompatible with party discipline. The writer responded with fierce attacks on the National Party politicians in his prose and poetry of the mid-1930s, but the expulsion must have hit him hard. Although he had been moving towards a more militaristic strategy in his campaign



for Scottish independence from around 1930, he remained loyal to his personal programme for national regeneration and probably felt that MacCormick had deprived him of his rightful place within the national movement. In consequence, the propagandist who had originally been at the centre of events in the twenties, was cut off from his former associations from around 1933. For a period, the self-declared herald of the Scottish Renaissance was reduced to a lone island prophet, which explains his pessimism towards the end of the period.

In the following, I am going to examine Hugh MacDiarmid's vision of Scotland as it comes across in his writings from the period 1919 to 1943. I want to focus on his prose writings because I think that is where his revaluation of Scotland comes across most clearly, but will consider the poetry whenever it is appropriate to do so. I have divided my discussion into three parts: "Calling Out the Scottish Renaissance", "Lourd on my Hert" and "Poet's Luck". The first section deals with MacDiarmid's ideas of the 1920s. Of the three parts, that offers the most detailed examination of the author's writings, which I believe is justified by the fact that this was when he defined his concept of a Scottish revival. The following sections discuss MacDiarmid's politics and poetics of the 1930s. "Lourd on my Hert" will look at *Cencrastus* and the political writings of the mid-1930s, while the third chapter considers the aesthetics behind such publications as *The Islands of Scotland* (1939) and *Lucky Poet* (1943). In the thirties, the artist was not necessarily in a position to print his writings at the time of composition, however, which is why I have chosen a thematic approach to the late MacDiarmid.

## Calling out the Scottish Renaissance 1919-30

As Robert Crawford notes in the opening pages of "Scottish Literature and English Studies" from *The Scottish Invention of English Literature*, Hugh MacDiarmid was not the first to worry about the state of Scottish arts when he launched his campaign for a Scottish revival in the early 1920s (Crawford 1998: 225-32). In 1898 T. F. Henderson had provided his account of native tradition in *Scottish Vernacular Literature*, and in the third edition from 1910, he added the following preface:

On the appearance, some twelve years ago, of the first edition of this book, doubt was expressed as to the fitness of the term "vernacular" to designate the literature of which it treats. It may, therefore, be explained that here the term is not used to denote merely a common, vulgar, provincial or dialect literature, but what, in a loose form, may be termed native or national Scottish literature, as distinguished from the Scottish

literature for which the medium of expression is modern English.  
(Henderson 1910: v)

Henderson's insistence on the status of vernacular literature as a national tradition implies a general uneasiness with the role of Scottish culture. The final distinction between vernacular writing and Anglo-Scottish literature suggests that Scottish culture was coming under increased pressure from its English neighbour, and similar concerns were voiced by Henderson's contemporaries J. H. Millar and Gregory Smith, whose *A Literary History of Scotland* (1903) and *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919) had identified traits which the authors thought peculiar to Scottish tradition. It is probably no coincidence that three major studies of Scottish tradition were written within twenty years of each other. On the contrary, the critics may have been responding to a fear in the population that Scotland was losing distinctive aspects of its nationhood, and that the nation might eventually disappear into the larger entity of Great Britain. Creative writers, too, were stimulated by the prospect of the possible submergence of Scotland. In "Modern Poetry in Scots Before MacDiarmid", Colin Milton mentions Robert Louis Stevenson's decision to write poetry in Scots in spite of his pessimism with regard to a possible future for that language (Milton 1987: 15). John Buchan, Charles Murray and Violet Jacob also chose to compose verse in the North East Doric rather than Standard English, and although their efforts were later discarded by MacDiarmid, they contributed to the process that would eventually transform the vernacular from a medium for rustic verse to a vehicle for modern thought (Milton 1987: 35).

Despite such long-term trends, which imply that the nation was not as blind to the state of the arts as its Renaissance critics later claimed, it makes little sense to speak of a national revival before Hugh MacDiarmid. T. F. Henderson, J. H. Millar and G. Gregory Smith might have been aware of the neglect of Scottish culture, but they focused on the older Scottish writers exclusively, which means that they aimed to preserve rather than revive. As for the dialect poets, they may have proved Scots a possible medium for poetry, but they tended to be conservative in their use of the language. Accordingly, they would save Scots phrases from obscurity, but found little reason to renew the language – to seek out expressions that allowed them to voice contemporary ideas. In the light of that, MacDiarmid's early denunciations of the North East revival are justified. In response to the London Burns Club's campaign for the Doric in the early 1920s,



MacDiarmid declared in *The Aberdeen Free Press* that such activities were essentially reactive rather than progressive (MacDiarmid 1922/1984a: 754). The North East dialect reflected rustic sentiments rather than modern philosophy, which made it an unsuitable vehicle for a revival that intended to engage with the latter. MacDiarmid continues:

My main points here are that the Vernacular Circle have not really addressed themselves at all to the root problems of the Doric as a literary medium, and that the Vernacular Cult in its present form – like its wider aspect, the Burns Cult, which Dr Bulloch has significantly admitted is mainly maintained by people who read little or nothing and poetry least of all, and must accordingly be regarded as a great inhibiting agency, preventing the development of an atmosphere in Scotland congenial to modern ideas and ideals – cannot be dissociated from its reactionary elements and from the consequences of an inherent contempt for culture and the tendency to regard people of progressive culture and ideas as “superior” and snobbish. (MacDiarmid 1922/1984a: 755).

On the surface, the author’s dismissal of the Doric reads like a specimen of the inconsistency which he was famously associated with throughout his career. Yet his criticism was not targeted at the language itself, but at the way it had been used by North East revivalists and Burns Clubs enthusiasts alike. Experimentalism, not conservatism, was the key to MacDiarmid’s Renaissance project, which suggests a fundamental change of attitude to Scotland and Scottish culture.

A clear indication that something was happening in Scottish literature, came with the announcement of *The Scottish Chapbook* in 1922. Prior to that, MacDiarmid had edited three anthologies of contemporary poetry, but where in *Northern Numbers* he had relied on established names such as John Buchan and Neil Munro, *The Scottish Chapbook* was intended as a forum for the young. The first issue, which was printed in August 1922, included, besides the editor’s own writings, work by Christine Orr, John Fergusson, William Soutar and Robert Crawford. Later editions introduced Helen B. Cruickshank, Neil Gunn, Edwin Muir, and James Pittendrigh Macgillivray, and there is an interesting correspondence between the contributors to *The Scottish Chapbook* and the artists MacDiarmid later portrayed in *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (1926). In relation to the present discussion, it is for the polemics rather than the poetry that *The Scottish Chapbook* is important. In addition to creative work, each issue contained a long editorial comment, and it was in these “Causeries” the poet set out his programme for the Scottish Renaissance. The format of MacDiarmid’s proclamations is significant. Since the publication of the Futurist Manifesto in *The New Age* in 1914, it had become



fashionable among the moderns to declare their beliefs in public, and as a reader of *The New Age*, MacDiarmid would have been aware of this trend. As a result, he adopted a manifesto style for his editorials as we see in the following extract from the 1923 “Causerie” that became the initial part of “A Theory of Scots Letters”:

We base our belief in the possibility of a great Scottish Literary Renaissance, deriving its strength from the resources that lie latent and almost unsuspected in the Vernacular, upon the fact that the genius of our Vernacular enables us to secure with comparative ease the very effects and swift transitions which other literatures are for the most part unsuccessfully endeavouring to cultivate in languages that have a very different and inferior bias. Whatever the potentialities of the Doric may be, however, there cannot be a revival in the real sense of the word – a revival of the spirit as distinct from a mere renewed vogue of the letter – unless these potentialities are in accord with the newest and truest tendencies of human thought. (MacDiarmid 1923/1992: 19)

As a declaration of the editor’s aims, the above paragraph is central in at least three respects. First of all, the tone differs radically from that of the T. F. Henderson passage I quoted previously (pp. 59-60). While Henderson had felt the need to justify his interest in Scottish writing through a reference to its national status, such concerns were no longer relevant to MacDiarmid, who took for granted the existence of an autonomous Scottish tradition as well as its importance to the world at large. The second interesting element in the editorial is the use of “we”. Such pluralism could be tied to the declamatory manner of the “Causerie”, but it may also represent an attempt on behalf of the author to present as a movement what in the early 1920s was essentially a one-man project. On MacDiarmid’s tendency to boost his numbers, Angus Calder writes in his introduction to the first volume of *The Raucle Tongue*:

Grieve-MacDiarmid-etc. were a tribe of scribblers who frequently quoted and even reviewed each other. They were not always in full agreement. Burns is sometimes a major but misunderstood poet, sometimes a brainless dead-end. People whom we now regard as minor poets might be puffed to the skies here, as harbingers of Scottish Renaissance, or put down mercilessly there, as examples of the general feebleness of recent Scottish writing – in English, in Scots, or just generally. The point was to draw attention to issues which the tribal assembly could not claim to have fully resolved. (in MacDiarmid 1996b: 4)

The third and final characteristic of MacDiarmid’s style in “A Theory of Scots Letters” is his emphasis on the necessary fusion of modernism and nationalism. New Scottish art would be developed from the native traits that had been identified by Gregory Smith, among others, in such works as *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence*, but

modern Scottish artists were to recognise their heritage as a starting point, not a goal in itself. Innovation, not preservation, was at the centre of MacDiarmid's programme, which represents a departure from Henderson's defeatism.

On the cover of *The Scottish Chapbook* was printed the slogan "Not Tradition – Precedents" above the drawing of a lion rampant. Such images refer to the principles of Scots, nationalism and modernism which were at the core of MacDiarmid's campaign for a new Scotland. The vernacular and nationalism were essential because an insistence on Scottishness would enable the nation break free from English domination. Modernism, on the other hand, was to ensure that the Scottish revival was progressive and in line with contemporary tendencies in the arts in a wider sense. Initially, MacDiarmid appears confident that there was enough of his countrymen who had understood the need for change and who would therefore be sympathetic to his programme for national regeneration. In an open letter to *The Glasgow Herald* he advertised *The Scottish Chapbook* as a forum for "that minority in Scotland, sufficiently interested or capable of becoming interested in experimental poetics" (MacDiarmid 1922/1984a: 757). In practice, this "minority" must have turned out smaller than the author had expected, for in 1923 *The Scottish Chapbook* ceased publication. *The Scottish Nation* and *The Northern Review* fared no better, and in 1925, MacDiarmid put a temporary halt to his editorial activities. Following the collapse of his own ventures, the poet's main outlet became *The Scottish Educational Journal* to which he contributed a weekly column under the heading "Contemporary Scottish Studies" from 1925 to 1926. In comparison with the earlier prose, *Contemporary Scottish Studies* represented a change of strategy. As an appendix to the 1926 edition, the author printed a list of works he considered useful for the reader intending to take up Scottish studies, which suggests that he had adopted a pedagogical approach that was in line with the aims and objectives of *The Scottish Educational Journal*. Although it would have been less obvious to a contemporary reader, who received *Contemporary Scottish Studies* in weekly instalments rather than as a whole, MacDiarmid's argument was clearly underpinned by his personal agenda for the Scottish revival. In the third essay, for instance, he observes on novelist Neil Munro:

There are quite a large number of competent well-read Scots even today – albeit fewer than there were ten years ago, and like to be progressively fewer as the years pass and post-war mentality asserts its complete difference from pre-war or wartime mentality – who swear by Neil Munro and regard him as a great writer. There is no need to be hard upon



them for this misconception: rather let us seek to understand it – for it is perfectly, if a little subtly, understandable, and understanding of it is a key to many other things in contemporary Scottish literature. For the truth of the matter may be just as dogmatically – if regretfully! – stated as the untruth is: Neil Munro is not a great writer, he is not even a good writer – at best he is no more than a (somewhat painfully) respectable craftsman. (MacDiarmid 1926/1995: 18)

As a critique of Munro's work, such comments are of little significance, for, although Munro may not have been the greatest novelist of his time, it is presumptuous to discard him altogether. As a specimen of MacDiarmid's Renaissance ethos, on the contrary, the passage is central. On the most general level, *Contemporary Scottish Studies* moves between condemnation and praise. The first essays challenge establishment icons such as John Buchan, Charles Murray and J. M. Barrie, whereas the pieces that follow introduce "new" faces such as R. B. Cunninghame Graham, James Pittendrigh Macgillivray, Edwin Muir and Francis George Scott. On a similar note, MacDiarmid's attack on Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's *Songs of the Hebrides* is paired with a celebration of Highland novelist Neil Gunn, who had been among the first respondents to the poet's 1922 manifestos (MacDiarmid 1926/1995: 308-21). Where the older generation is dismissed for its old-fashioned manners and provincialism, young Scots are singled out for their adherence to the ideas of nationalism and modernism, which the author believed represented the way forward for Scotland. When read as a whole, the message of *Contemporary Scottish Studies* is that progressive Scots must abandon all aspects of Scottish culture prior to the First World War in order to embrace the principles of the Scottish Literary Renaissance wholeheartedly. Scottish artists were making a difference, MacDiarmid stresses, but only a few Scots had shown their appreciation of it, and in order to reach the rest, he felt he had to shout. As a result, the readers of *Contemporary Scottish Studies* were not to be converted to the programme of the Scottish Renaissance on the basis of artistic merit exclusively. They were to learn that MacDiarmid's blend of nationalism and modernism represented the only modern tendency within Scottish culture, whilst the alternatives of Munro, Murray and Barrie were symptomatic of past parochialism.

The optimistic vision of a renascent Scotland, which MacDiarmid had promoted in his early prose, and the growing disenchantment with the conservatism of fellow-Scots that comes across in *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, meet on an artistic level in *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926). In *A Drunk Man*, W. N. Herbert observes in his



study *To Circumjack MacDiarmid*, “MacDiarmid attempts both to align himself with and free himself from heterodox nationalist thinking” (Herbert 1992b: 43). The nationalism the poet aimed to dissociate himself from is the somewhat conservative insistence on Scottishness for its own sake. In the early twenties, he had objected to the campaign for a vernacular revival on the grounds that it would preserve rather than revitalise the Scots language. In the opening stanzas of *A Drunk Man*, he consolidates his position with the following attack on the Burns Federation:

You canna gang to a Burns supper even  
 Wi’oot some wizened scrunt o’ a knock-knee  
 Chineese turns roon to say, “Him Haggis – velly goot!”  
 And ten to wan the piper is a Cockney.

No’ wan in fifty kens a wurd Burns wrote  
 But misapplied is a’body’s property,  
 And gin there was his like alive the day  
 They’d be the last a kennin’ haund to gi’e –

Croose London Scotties wi’ their braw shirt fronts  
 And a’ their fancy freen’s, rejoicin’  
 That similah gatherings in Timbuctoo,  
 Bagdad – and Hell, nae doot – are voicin’

Burns’ sentiments o’ universal love,  
 In pidgin English or in wild-fowl Scots,  
 And toastin’ ane wha’s nocht to them but an  
 Excuse for faitherin’ Genius wi’ *their* thochts.  
 (MacDiarmid 1926/1987: 6-8)

The second stanza suggests that it was their celebration of traditional icons such as Robert Burns that had made MacDiarmid’s contemporaries insensitive to modern art. They had failed to acknowledge that renewal was necessary if Scottish literature was to resume its former strength, and their ignorance had caused the tradition to decline. As with culture, so with the nation. Through his persona of the Drunk Man, the poet searches for a glimpse of hope within the different spheres of Scottish life, only to discover that the old symbols of Scottishness have failed the nation. As a result, Scotland has been reduced to the superficial images of bagpipe, kilt and Burns supper, while the nation has ceased to exist on an aesthetic level.

Against such flawed patriotism MacDiarmid places the real nationalism of the Scottish Renaissance. In “A Vision of Myself”, the section that follows the initial attack on the Burns Cult, the author expresses his refusal to compromise when he proclaims to

be “whaur extremes meet”. He continues with the following lines which in a neat manner embrace both the international and national dimensions of his Renaissance idea: “I ha’e nae doot some foreign philosopher/Has wrocht a system oot to justify/A’this: but I’m a Scot wha blin’ly follows/Auld Scottish instincts, and I winna try.” (MacDiarmid 1926/1987: 14). MacDiarmid’s message is that it is necessary to start with Scotland. Only when Scots have proven their worth as individuals and nationals, may they aspire towards more universal matters, which explains why he found it necessary to introduce *A Drunk Man* with a fierce condemnation of his fellow-Scots. “To be yersel’s – and to mak’ that worth bein’”, the poet declares at a later stage in the poem, which in essence epitomises his programme for the national revival (MacDiarmid 1926/1987: 62). MacDiarmid’s argument in the opening of *A Drunk Man* may be compared with that of *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, which is perhaps not surprising, given that both were completed in 1926. In these works the author insists that the old symbols of Scottishness are symptoms of “bad” nationalism because they are essentially reactionary, whereas radicalism, experimentation and innovation are welcome signs of a new age. Indirectly, that defines everything relating to the older generation of Barrie and Munro as “bad”, while the achievement of the emerging generation, the representatives of the Scottish Renaissance, is “good”. Once again, progressivism and modernism are associated with the Renaissance, which suggests an element of self-promotion on behalf of an artist whose aim it was for himself and his fellow-moderns to be recognised as breakers within Scottish tradition.

MacDiarmid’s choice of Scots represents a more subtle declaration of his nationalist objective. Since 1922, he had been experimenting with different ways in which the vernacular might accommodate his ideas in lyrics such as “The Watergaw”, “Empty Vessel” and “The Eemis Stane”, and as Kenneth Buthlay has demonstrated in his essay “Hugh MacDiarmid’s ‘Conversion’ to Scots”, his preferred method was to adopt an already existing phrase, then add a twisting conclusion which underlined his modernist perspective (Buthlay 1989). In “Braid Scots and the Sense of Smell” from *The Scottish Nation* (1923), MacDiarmid claims to have chosen Scots because it enabled him to procure effects similar to those of James Joyce in *Ulysses*. The Scots language, he points out, might seem more amoral than Standard English because of its sensual nature, but impressionism was a key element in European modernism and one of the progressive features of Scots (MacDiarmid 1923/1996b: 73). MacDiarmid’s reference to Joyce



suggests that it might have been his fascination with language and formal experimentation that brought him to the vernacular. In relation to that, W. N. Herbert writes in a contribution to the MacDiarmid centenary issue of *Chapman*:

I would seriously dispute that MacDiarmid's interest in Scots was principally to do with nationalist questions of the integrity of the language and its use in an independent Scotland. In the same way I would dispute that his interest in Marxism stemmed entirely from his genuine desire to liberate the working class of Scotland. And by the same token, I very much doubt that his interest in science was solely inspired by his burning need to reconcile all specialisms. Principally, entirely, solely. MacDiarmid was, above all and before any other considerations, a poet obsessed by the function of language. (Herbert 1992a: 18-9)

Though Herbert is right to stress that the poet's ambitions were primarily literary in kind, I think nationalism remains a factor behind his choice of Scots as the medium for *A Drunk Man*. In the most general sense, language was still considered a key aspect of nationhood in the aftermath of the First World War. In my historical survey, I mentioned how a recovery of their national tongues had been essential to the Norwegian and Finnish movements of the nineteenth-century (p. 44), and MacDiarmid's references to the Norwegian poet and nationalist Henrik Wergeland in "Gairmscoile" proves that he was aware of that (MacDiarmid 1926/1978: 73). On top of that, the Scots language ties in with the "bad" nationalism/"good" nationalism theme which I considered above. In "A Theory of Scots Letters", MacDiarmid had identified Scots as one of the central concerns of the Scottish Renaissance because it allowed the artist to combine nationalist sentiments and modernist experimentation, and *A Drunk Man* was meant to prove that such a poetic strategy would work in long, philosophical poems as well as the short lyrics with which he had previously been connected. Meanwhile, the Scots language ensured a Renaissance presence even in parts of the poem, where the poet appears to be moving beyond his Scottish theme.

Eager as he might have been to foreground the Scottish dimension in his poem, MacDiarmid was equally concerned that *A Drunk Man* should be read in relation to European modernism in a wider sense. In the section "The Gothic Thistle", he acknowledges his debt to T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland", whereas his adaptation into Scots of poems by Alexander Blok, George Ramaekers and Edmund Rocher points to the European context of his work. The message of MacDiarmid's modernism seems to be that the artist may stand on Scottish ground, yet reach out towards the absolute. "T. S. Eliot – it's a Scottish name – /Afore he wrote 'The Waste Land' s'ud ha'e come/To



Scotland here”, the writer stresses (MacDiarmid 1926/1987: 30). The implication is that Scotland provides adequate scope for modernist art – that the poet’s home town of Montrose offers as much material for contemplation as Eliot had found in the metropolis of London. At a later stage in *A Drunk Man*, MacDiarmid compares his personal struggle in “the Thistle’s land” to Dostoevsky’s trials in Russia (MacDiarmid 1926/1987: 130). Once again, that reads as a dismissal of the suggestion that Scotland might be too small to leave an impression upon European culture. “Montrose or Nazareth?”, the poet asks, only to demonstrate that in the existentialist quest that confronts the modernist artist, it hardly matters at all (MacDiarmid 1926/1987: 16). Towards the end of *A Drunk Man* the opposite poles of Scotland and Cosmos are brought together in the image of a Great Wheel that embraces all times and all places. On the edge of the Wheel, MacDiarmid sees “Wee Scotland squattin’ like a flea,” which underlines the insignificance of Scotland’s squabbles within a universal frame (MacDiarmid 1926/1987: 176). This vision leaves the speaker with an impossible choice: if he wants to pursue a nationalist agenda, he will inevitably have to enlarge Scotland out of all proportion to its proper size, which may be at the expense of individual achievement. If, on the contrary, he prefers to follow his poetic ambition, he will have to reduce Scotland to a minimum as any kind of nationalist commitment would hinder his artistic quest for absolutes. Instead of trying to resolve the dilemma, however, MacDiarmid avoids the issue. In *Hugh MacDiarmid*, Kenneth Buthlay observes:

The human mind finds no ultimate answer to its questioning, of course. The Drunk Man leaves us in the dark. He drops the Great Wheel not with a bang but a whimper, and turns to his wife for comfort. MacDiarmid the intrepid cosmonaut leaves us with a row of asterisks on the page. Even the question of how to write a great national poem when you are unfortunate enough to be a Scotsman in 1926 is, in the words of Saintsbury deferring judgment on the Russian novelists, “taken to avizandum”. (Buthlay 1982: 56).

The unresolved issues at the end of *A Drunk Man* indicate that the artistic principles of nationalism and modernism may not have been as easily compatible as MacDiarmid had announced in his early prose. The writer’s idea of a modern Scotland contains some fundamental flaws, in other words, which come to the fore in his writings of the 1930s.

In a sense, *Albyn* concludes MacDiarmid’s work of the 1920s. It contains an analysis of the state of Scottish politics, economics and culture towards the end of the decade

and elaborates on suggestions the poet had made earlier rather than raise any new concerns. In the initial part, for instance, the author underlines what impact has been made by his campaign for a Scottish Renaissance through a list of contributions made to the revival within the fields of Scottish drama, music and literature (MacDiarmid 1927/1996a: 4-5). Such a wave of creativity, he argues, represents a liberation of Scottish art from the Calvinist influence which for centuries restricted the freedom of the artist, but one difficulty remains:

Scottish genius is being liberated from its Genevan prison-house. But the centralization of British arts and affairs in London is still restricting it in ways that can only be addressed by that re-orientation of facilities which would follow the re-establishment of an independent Scottish Parliament, or, in the event of a return to the system of Provinces, a federation of assemblies. The movement cannot manifest its full stature and move freely, save within that framework of a Scotland become once again a nation in every sense of the term for which it has been designed.  
(MacDiarmid 1927/1996a: 5)

As one gathers from the passage above, the prospects for the cultural revival is closely connected with the success of political nationalism in *Albyn*, which is perhaps not surprising, given that the poet was becoming increasingly involved with nationalist politics around 1927. In addition, it may reflect a growing disillusionment with the nation's failure to respond to the call for a literary renaissance as MacDiarmid might have thought it easier to reach a larger audience from a political platform. Whatever his reason, the writer engages himself more seriously with politics at this stage in his career. His contributions to political organs such as *The Scots Independent*, *The Pictish Review* and *The Scots Observer* grow in number, while his opinions on the unequal partnership between Scotland and England become more pronounced. For a period, the propagandist takes over from the poet.

### **“Lourd on my Hert”: Hugh MacDiarmid’s politics in the 1930s**

Hugh MacDiarmid maintained an uncompromising, separatist line throughout the 1930s. In *Albyn* he had highlighted the inhibiting impact of anglicisation and centralisation on Scottish art, and in 1931 he developed such views in “English Ascendancy in British Literature”. In comparison with previous polemics that were predominantly Scottish in content, “English Ascendancy in British Literature” extended his argument to the whole of the British Isles. At the heart of MacDiarmid’s analysis was the thesis that the future development of British culture depended on a restored



balance between the centre of England and the Celtic nations Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Prominent modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Robert Graves, the author claimed, had already recognised that contemporary trends were working against English domination (MacDiarmid 1931/1992: 65). Now the most promising work came from Scottish, Irish and Welsh artists rather than the Imperial centre of London, but unfortunately the combined arrogance and ignorance of the English had hitherto prevented their acknowledgement of such facts (MacDiarmid 1931/1992: 67). According to MacDiarmid, the solution was a renewed emphasis on the Celtic element. Through the work of W. B. Yeats, Douglas Hyde and Daniel Corkery, Ireland had recovered its Gaelic heritage, which for generations had been suppressed by the English hegemony (MacDiarmid 1931/1992: 63). The Scots would be the next to recognise the value of their neglected, national tradition, but the success of the Scottish Renaissance relied on three conditions:

The first has perhaps already been secured or is likely to be, and that is a rising tide of Scottish national consciousness. The second is a thorough-going reconcentration, in our schools and universities and elsewhere, on the study of Scottish Literature....The third point is the necessity to bridge the gulf between Gaelic and Scots. Both have been tremendously handicapped by circumstances, and yet in their evolution, thus miserably attenuated and driven underground by external factors, they have continued to complement and correct each other in the most remarkable way. (MacDiarmid 1931/1992: 73-74)

“English Ascendancy in British Literature” invites a postcolonial reading because of its emphasis on a necessary re-negotiation of the relationship between centre and periphery. One should bear in mind that MacDiarmid was using this particular piece to argue the case for an autonomous Scottish within a British context, however, which explains his frequent references to the Irish and Welsh situation. In his Scottish prose of the early 1930s, on the other hand, he is as dismissive of his fellow-Scots as ever, since it had been their “bad” nationalism that had allowed the nation to degenerate in the first place. As in *Contemporary Scottish Studies* and *A Drunk Man*, it is thus the Anglo-Scottish establishment rather than the English that is the poet's main target in the 1930s, which weakens the postcolonial argument.

Although he continued to express his sympathy for a separatist line in such pieces as “Whither Scotland?” (1931), “The Lion Upside Down” (1932) and “A Letter from Scotland” (1934), *A Drunk Man* appears to have made MacDiarmid aware of the unresolved problems within his twin philosophies of nationalism and modernism. The



1926 poem had been intended as a grand, nationalist gesture, but, as Kenneth Buthlay remarked, it went “not with a bang but a whimper” (Buthlay 1982: 56). According to a 1926 letter to George Ogilvie, MacDiarmid's next project, *To Circumjack Cencrastus*, was to remedy that:

It will be a much bigger thing than the *Drunk Man* in every way. It is complementary to it really. *Cencrastus* is the fundamental serpent, the underlying unifying principle of the cosmos. To circumjack is to encircle. *To Circumjack Cencrastus* - to square the circle, to box the compass, etc. But where the *Drunk Man* is in one sense a reaction from the “Kailyard”, *Cencrastus* transcends that altogether – the Scotsman gets rid of the thistle, “the bur' o' the world” – and his spirit at last inherits its proper sphere. Psychologically it represents the resolution of the sadism and masochism, the synthesis of the various sets of antithesis I was posing in the *Drunk Man*. It will not depend on the contrasts of realism and metaphysics, bestiality and beauty, humour and madness - but move on a plane of pure beauty and pure music. (MacDiarmid 1926/1984a: 91)

As the poet admitted in the 1930 letter I quoted in the introduction (p. 58), *Cencrastus* did not meet his high expectations. He was not ready for such a task, he stressed, because he first of all had to “get rid of all kinds of elements ... which have been standing between me and my real job” (MacDiarmid 1931/1984a: 457). In a sense, *Cencrastus* deepens the ideological divisions that were already manifest in *A Drunk Man*. In her discussion of the poem, “The Undeservedly Broukit Bairn”, Margery McCulloch identifies two basic themes within the work. The *Cencrastus* theme, which is represented by MacDiarmid's symbol of the snake, explores the individual quest for spiritual fulfilment and may be compared to the journey of the Drunk Man in the 1926 poem. As a contrast to that, McCulloch puts the Scottish theme, which relates to the “bad” nationalism paragraphs of *A Drunk Man*, and which is constituted by the poet's contemplation on the state of the nation. Where in 1926 the two themes had interacted, however, they now evolve independently of each other as McCulloch observes with reference to the Scottish theme:

[The] Scottish theme, instead of being part of the larger exploration of material and transcendental reality as in *A Drunk Man*, acquires a life of its own which in the end overwhelms the more universal *Cencrastus* theme of the poem and destroys the equilibrium between its parts. (McCulloch 1982: 166)

In relation to the present discussion, the *Cencrastus* theme reflects MacDiarmid's vision of spiritual revival, whereas the Scottish theme is characterised by a growing

In spite of the frustration that lingers on at the end of the poem, MacDiarmid sets out with his idealism intact. The aim of the poem, he pointed out in his 1926 letter to Ogilvie, is somehow to get around Cencrastus, encircle the serpent which he imagines as “the underlying unifying principle of the cosmos”(MacDiarmid, 1926/1984a: 91). Such commitment to universalism is underlined by the initial invocation of Cencrastus:

There is nae movement in the world like yours.  
You are as different frae a'thing else  
As water frae a book, fear frae the stars. . .  
The licht that History sheds on onything  
Is naething to the licht you shed on it.  
Time's dourest riddles to solution slide  
Like Latréaumont's cormorant: and Man  
Shudders to see you slippin' into place. . .  
The simple explanations that you gi'e  
O' age-lang mysteries are little liked  
Even by them wha best appreciate  
The soond advice you gied to Mither Eëve,  
Or think they dae.  
(MacDiarmid 1930/1978: 181)

MacDiarmid's choice of Cencrastus as his symbol of the life-giving force is significant, for, like the poet's general vision, it blends the particular with the universal. The serpent is the Celtic symbol of wisdom, but, as Alan Bold points out in *The Terrible Crystal*, it is also the Curly Snake, a childhood memory from the Langholm landscape (Bold 1983a: 128). In a neat manner Cencrastus thus fuses Highland and Lowland, Gaelic and Scots, but it embraces even more. In Norse mythology the snake encircles the cosmos, yet it is a child of evil, the trickster god Loke, and only when it is left undisturbed, will the balance between good and evil prevail. Such equilibrium is at the heart of MacDiarmid's philosophy. In "English Ascendancy in British Literature", he had argued that a Celtic revival was necessary in order to restore the balance between England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, and in *Cencrastus* that thesis is applied to world affairs in a wider sense. Hence the artist suggests in the following passage that the world has become temporarily unbalanced with the rise of Soviet Russia, but that the hidden resources of the Celtic world might restore harmony:

If we turn to Europe and see  
 Hoo the emergence o' the Russian Idea's  
 Broken the balance o' the North and Sooth  
 And needs a coonter that can only be  
     The Gaelic Idea  
 To mak' a parallelogram o' forces,  
     Complete the Defence o' the West,  
 And end the English betrayal o' Europe.  
 (MacDiarmid 1930/1978: 222-23)

MacDiarmid's presentation of the Gaelic spirit as the force that will restore order, complements Oswald Spengler's image of the rise and fall of civilisations in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. Against the decay of England and Lowland Scotland, he places triumphant Gaeldom, and that idea is developed throughout the 1930s.

It is neither the elusive serpent nor the Gaelic idea that epitomises *Cencrastus*, however, but the picture of an individual confined by personal and national factors. The most memorable accounts of his trials are the lyrics "The Mavis of Pabal" and "Lourd on my Hert". "The Mavis of Pabal" appears only ten pages into the poem, which underlines how closely related are the optimistic movement of *Cencrastus* and the underlying sense of individual and national decay. Through images characteristic of MacDiarmid's Renaissance writings of the 1920s, the lyric portrays the poet as the lone herald of revival, eager to see life return to the barren lands of Scotland, but it ends in frustration. The speaker recognises the merits of his exalted position, the bright horizon that can only be approached from the brink of this "bricht impossible hill", but he is alone (MacDiarmid 1930/1978: 192). His fellow-Scots have either forgotten the path to the summit or fled the country, and his song is likely to be the last. A more humorous variation on that theme is "Lourd on my Hert":

*Lourd on my hert as winter lies  
 The state that Scotland's in the day.  
 Spring to the North has aye come slow  
 But noo dour winter's like to stay  
     For guid,  
     And no' for guid!*

*O wae's me on the weary days  
 When it is scarce grey licht at noon;  
 It maun be a' the stupid folk  
 Diffusin' their dullness roon and roon  
     Like soot,  
     That keeps the sunlicht oot.*



*Nae wonder if I think I see  
 A lichter shadow than the neist  
 I'm fain to cry: "The dawn, the dawn!  
 I see it brakin' in the East."*

*But ah,*

*— It's juist mair snaw!*

(MacDiarmid 1930/1978: 204-5)

Though ironic and self-mocking in tone, MacDiarmid's winter imagery is reminiscent of Edwin Muir's "Scotland's Winter" from *Scottish Journey* (1935). It communicates the feeling that the poet's attempt to awaken the Scottish nation has been in vain because the majority of Scots do not see the need for revival. The author feels defeated by mediocrity, which explains why his idealistic *Cencrastus* theme eventually disappears into a condemnation of Scottish reality. As his lack of success in the 1920s shows, Scotland had not responded to the call for a Scottish Renaissance, and in consequence, the artist now turns his back on the Scots.

In ideological terms, Hugh MacDiarmid seems to be changing his priorities after the completion of *Cencrastus* in 1930. In his biography of the poet, Alan Bold notes a previous involvement with the Welsh labour movement around 1911 as well as the poet's election as a socialist to the Montrose Town Council in 1922, and such left-wing sympathies come across in *A Drunk Man*, for instance, when in "The Ballad of the Crucified Rose" the speaker mourns the failure of the 1926 General Strike (Bold 1990: 83 and 167). In spite of such public manifestations of his commitment, socialism remained secondary to nationalism in the 1920s. In my introduction I quoted the poet's 1928 retort to the socialist John Clarke, and the basis of his argument in that piece was the need to procure Scottish autonomy first (p. 57). After *Cencrastus*, on the other hand, which had highlighted MacDiarmid's growing disenchantment with Scotland, communism moves to the centre of his vision in such poems as "First Hymn to Lenin", "The Seamless Garment" and "Second Hymn to Lenin". In "Second Hymn to Lenin" from 1932, for example, the writer declares how it is necessary for art to win through to the people:

*Are my poems spoken in the factories and fields,  
 In the streets o' the toon?  
 Gin they're no', then I'm failin' to dae  
 What I ocht to ha' dune.*

*Gin I canna win through to the man in the street,  
 The wife by the hearth,*

*A' the cleverness on earth 'll no' mak' up  
For the damnable dearth.*

*"Haud on, haud on; what poet's dune that?  
Is Shakespeare read,  
Or Dante or Milton or Goethe or Burns?"  
— You heard what I said.  
(MacDiarmid 1932/1978: 323)*

In a decade, when British poets such as W. H. Auden, Cecil Day-Lewis and Stephen Spender would famously declare their ideological beliefs in public, MacDiarmid was the first to stress the need to bridge the traditional divide between poetry and the working classes. In hindsight, the third stanza is ironic, however, for, while Robert Burns had always appealed to the Scottish population at large, MacDiarmid never attracted more than a select following. With reference to that, one wonders whether MacDiarmid's notion of communism was ever intended as a mass movement. It seems too closely connected with the Romantic image of the artist as the sole herald of revival, which he had presented in "The Mavis of Pabal", as well as the individual quest for spiritual fulfilment that lay at the heart of modernist art. It is associated with a perception of the artist, MacDiarmid, as the leader of a revolutionary elite, in other words; not the identification of the poet with the masses. Accordingly, the implication of "Second Hymn to Lenin" is not that poetry must be written for the people, but that the revolution would raise the workers to a level of culture that enabled them to appreciate (MacDiarmid's) genius.

Occasionally, one suspects that MacDiarmid adopted communism because he felt the Scottish movement had failed to recognise his efforts. In the polemic "C. M. Grieve Speaks Out" from 1932, he refers to the nationalist leaders as "the old dead-heads who for decades had been responsible for Scotland's decadence", and the sole basis for such allegations seems to have been their inability to sympathise with the poet's radicalism (MacDiarmid 1932/1997: 391). On a more solemn note, he writes in a 1935 letter to Neil Gunn:

I have gone very far along a road from which there is no turning back and upon which one cannot have more than an irreducible minimum of company at any time. I have no idea how you stand now — in relation to Scottish Nationalism and in your general outlook and cultural conclusions; but I personally am implacably opposed to everything I have yet heard voiced in regard to any of these matters by any of my compatriots and striving incessantly to find means of expression for ideas at the utmost remove from all they can entertain or express. And I am



confident alike that I shall yet succeed in doing so and that my doing so will be an extremely important matter for Scotland and for far more than Scotland. (MacDiarmid 1935/1984a: 256-57).

At the time of writing, MacDiarmid was at a low point in his career. Since 1933, the combined effects of his expulsion from the National Party and the withdrawal to Whalsay had placed him at considerable distance from the Scottish scene, and gradually, the consequences of his marginal position dawned upon him. As the Gunn letter implies, he felt cut off in the Shetlands, which may have contributed to the nervous breakdown he suffered later that year (Bold *MacDiarmid* 1990: 380-83).

In spite of his personal trials, Hugh MacDiarmid continued his ideological battle for Scotland in poetry and prose. In 1934 the "First" and "Second Hymn to Lenin" were followed by an "Ode to All Rebels", in which he wanted to settle his relationship with his surroundings once and for all, but the content of the piece proved too controversial for the publisher (Bold 1990: 365-66). When *Stony Limits* came out, "Ode to All Rebels" had been replaced by "Lament for the Great Music", and although less obviously dogmatic in its message, the latter is probably the finer poem. MacDiarmid's troubles continued with *Red Scotland* from the mid-1930s. When Routledge agreed with Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid's proposal for a series on Scottish culture, the *Voice of Scotland* books, the poet was to contribute a piece on the role of Lenin in Scottish life. Such work was in line with the political outlook of both editors, and a 1934 letter from the publisher to MacDiarmid confirms that Routledge accepted the suggestion (MacDiarmid 1934/1984a: 536). In the end, *Red Scotland* was never published. What remains of the manuscript is located in the National Library of Scotland, and in addition to a size more than twice the length of the average contribution to the series, the content might explain why that is so. More than anything, *Red Scotland* reads as the author's final crusade against his former allies within the National Party:

So for as general politics are concerned the majority of Nationalists in the National Party are Conservatives, Liberals, Labourites, and those queer birds who claim to "have no politics but Nationalism" - the majority of Nationalists outside the National Party are left-wing Socialists and Communists and people sympathetic to and inclining towards Communism. The National Party is constitutionalist and Monarchical; the excluded and now subterraneously organised elements are disposed to revolutionary methods and, for the most part, out-and-out Republicans. (MacDiarmid 1935/36: 234-35)



As a manifestation of MacDiarmid's position in the latter half of the thirties, *Red Scotland* is crucial. The work combines the poet's wish to argue his case against the National Party with an advertisement for his Scottish brand of communism, and where the National Party never seems radical enough for MacDiarmid's taste, the Communist Party is found wanting in terms of Scottishness. From the two he takes what he requires for a personal philosophy of Scottish republicanism, which may be incompatible with its parent ideologies of nationalism and communism, but which is highly congenial with MacDiarmid's imagination. In 1938 the *Red Scotland* material was worked into the essay "The Red Scotland Line: Forward to the John Maclean Line", in which the author describes what progress he has made towards the Scottish republicanism that will eventually supersede the flawed Scottish Renaissance. In a manner not unlike his 1922/23 manifestos, he imagines himself as the leader of an intellectual vanguard that will revolutionise Scottish politics (MacDiarmid 1938/1998: 10-11). The parallels between such a vision and the writer's earlier call for a Scottish Renaissance are evident, and it appears that, although the shade of his politics had altered in the course of the 1930s, the content remains recognisably MacDiarmid.

### Poet's luck: Hugh MacDiarmid's poetics in the 1930s

*To Circumjack Cencrastus* was written at a moment of transition in Hugh MacDiarmid's development. On the one hand, he was trying to hold on to the regenerative vision of a Scottish Renaissance which he had actively been promoting since the 1920s; on the other, he was becoming increasingly concerned about the obvious limitations of Scotland and the national movement. Such a changing outlook seems to have influenced his attitude to language. Prior to 1930, he had demonstrated in his early lyrics as well as *A Drunk Man* how the Scots vernacular might express a commitment to cultural nationalism and modernism alike. His poetic vehicle would have to be Scottish, MacDiarmid had insisted, because it represented an alternative to the centralised culture of Standard English. In addition, it was to be modern, for only by following the models of contemporary art might the Scottish artist shed the parochialism of the previous century and interact with the world at large. By the time he had completed *Cencrastus* in 1930, his priorities were different. In comparison with the experimental Scots of *A Drunk Man*, *Cencrastus* was composed in a diluted version of the vernacular, which implies that formal questions were no longer to the fore of the poet's mind. In *Hugh MacDiarmid* Kenneth Buthlay ascribes the decline in the intensity

of MacDiarmid's Scots to his growing preoccupation with Celtic culture. Such an association, Buthlay claims, convinced MacDiarmid that he had been deprived of his authentic voice, which was Gaelic, and that Lowland Scots represented an inferior, anglicised language (Buthlay 1982: 67-68). Buthlay continues:

MacDiarmid's description of his language in *Cencrastus* as "hauf-English" is accurate enough. It is a thin mixture, which, while close to actual modern Scots speech, is deployed without much vitality, in contrast to the rich variety of Scots handled with such verve and flexibility in *A Drunk Man*. But MacDiarmid's biggest limitation is not perhaps the language he is using but the language he cannot use: Gaelic, the right language for a man who wants to stake the claims of the Gaelic Idea. (Buthlay 1982: 68)

Although powerful lyrics such as "Kinsfolk", "Milk-Wort and Bog-Cotton" and "Water Music" prove that he never lost his ability to compose poetry in Scots, MacDiarmid appears to have been looking for a new language in the 1930s. With specific reference to *Scots Unbound*, W. N. Herbert argues in *To Circumjack MacDiarmid* how the artist was coming to view the role of language as "linked to intellectual freedom in terms which prefigure *In Memoriam James Joyce* directly" (Herbert 1992b: 118). Herbert's mention of the Joyce poem, on which MacDiarmid commenced work around 1935, is significant, for, in a linguistic sense, that is probably the piece which is furthest removed from *A Drunk Man*: that is, the 1926 poem had been composed in a medium that, in spite of its experimental character, was essentially Scottish. Such connotations tied in with the poet's nationalist outlook because it ensured a sense of Scottish difference was maintained throughout the work, whilst substantiating the claim that modernist art was possible within a Scottish context. Yet such nationalist associations might be restricting on a philosophical level. Alan Riach recognises in *Hugh MacDiarmid's Epic Poetry* how the focus of MacDiarmid's verse changed in the 1930s in favour of a universal idea that would allow him to bring together all the contradictory elements within his vision (Riach 1991a: 14). Such an ever-expanding universalism required a more inclusive vehicle, and Scots was consequently reduced from its former status as the sole language of the Scottish Renaissance to one of the many dictions that made up this new medium. As Carl Freedman has discussed in his essay "Hugh MacDiarmid, James Joyce and World Language", MacDiarmid's new poetic vision is most clearly expressed in the 1955 work *In Memoriam James Joyce* where in true Joycean manner, the poet presents the fusion of all languages, all ideas, as the future of poetry (Freedman 1992).



In the light of MacDiarmid's move from linguistic nationalism toward multilingualism, his persistence with regard to Scots in the criticism of the mid-1930s is paradoxical. In 1934, *Stony Limits* demonstrated his mastery of a wide range of different types of Scots and English, but had it appeared in 1935/36, when it was due, *Red Scotland* would have maintained that Scots was the only medium available to the Scottish Renaissance. In *Red Scotland*, George Pratt Insh, whom MacDiarmid had praised in *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, was thus denounced because he had suggested in a 1934 review of Nan Shepherd that the future of Scots poetry lay with the "treatment of Scottish themes in the medium of standard English" (MacDiarmid 1935/36: 191). In 1936, MacDiarmid's views on the vernacular brought him to a confrontation with Edwin Muir over *Scott and Scotland*. As I shall return to in my chapter on Muir, the critic had his personal reasons for his pessimism with regard to the future of Scots. Yet MacDiarmid responded with anger, which is perhaps not surprising when the following passage from *Scott and Scotland* is taken into account:

Scottish poetry exists in a vacuum; it neither acts on the rest of literature nor reacts to it; and consequently it has shrunk to the level of anonymous folk-song. Hugh MacDiarmid has recently tried to revive it by impregnating it with all the contemporary influences of Europe one after another, and thus galvanize it into life by a series of violent shocks. In carrying out this experiment he has written some remarkable poetry; but he has left Scottish verse very much where it was before. (Muir 1936/1982b: 9)

To MacDiarmid, Muir's predictions represented a betrayal of everything he had been struggling to achieve since the 1920s. Although he might condemn the national movement himself, he was not ready to be told by Muir, or anyone else, that his vision of revival had been a one-man band only. On top of that, Muir was voicing serious doubts about the vernacular as a medium for literature, which had been one of the core principles in MacDiarmid's early programme for the Scottish Renaissance. Hence Muir questioned the very basis of MacDiarmid's idea of a nascent Scotland when in *Scott and Scotland* he declared the vernacular a dead language. In hindsight, MacDiarmid tried to rationalise his angry response. In a 1936 letter to Catherine Carswell, he implies that *Scott and Scotland* was merely his "pretext" for entering into a "big cultural fight" which he had been planning anyway (MacDiarmid 1936/1984a: 427). However, a number of factors suggest that MacDiarmid's retort was indeed provoked by *Scott and Scotland*, which had appeared at a very unfortunate moment in the poet's career. First of



all, MacDiarmid was still recovering from his nervous breakdown in 1935. The collapse was partly due to his arrival on Whalsay, which had alienated him from his former intellectual and nationalist circles. Such isolation made the poet sensitive to criticism, and the impact of such would increase in the case of Muir, whom MacDiarmid regarded as an old friend and ally. In addition to his intellectual solitude, MacDiarmid was being marginalised within the national movement more generally. His 1933 expulsion from the National Party, as well as the problems he had encountered in his search for publishers in the thirties, convinced him that he was being deliberately silenced by the Scottish establishment. In a letter to Catherine Carswell that seems to have been motivated by his exclusion from the Scottish issue of *The Left Review* that had appeared in November, 1936, he declared that “[Edwin] Muir and [J. H.] Whyte were partly instrumental in stopping my *Red Scotland* book”, and such fear of conspiracy made him rather inflexible with regard his original principles for the cultural revival (MacDiarmid 1936/1984a: 428). A final factor is MacDiarmid’s growing insecurity on the language issue. Hitherto there had been a straightforward connection between his nationalist ideology and his linguistic programme, but from 1932 that was no longer the case. In his search for a medium that corresponded to his universal vision, the poet was trying out various forms of English and Scots, and he may have felt such experimentation compromised his earlier position on Scots. As a result, MacDiarmid had his reasons to be sensitive on the language issue, which explains his hostility towards Muir in the years that followed.

While references to Muir in such works as the 1938 essay “The Red Scotland Line”, the introduction to *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry* (1941) and *Lucky Poet* (1943) ensured that MacDiarmid’s objections to *Scott and Scotland* were made absolutely clear, it is the linguistic universalism of *In Memoriam James Joyce* that represents the poet’s vision of Scotland in the late 1930s. Just as he was abandoning Scots in favour of an English inclusive of different linguistic codes, he was becoming increasingly sceptical as to whether nationalism alone provided the answers he sought. Scotland, it had appeared in *Cenchrastus*, was too narrow-minded to offer the artist the intellectual freedom he craved, and in order to remedy that, he adopted a more idealistic approach. As regards the questions of Scotland and Scottishness, MacDiarmid’s new philosophy first comes across in *Cenchrastus* where he employs the image of the Celtic serpent as a symbol of perfection in art. In that work, the elusive snake is eventually

buried beneath the author's bitter observations on the state of the nation. Yet it was developed as an idea throughout the thirties, with MacDiarmid coming increasingly to accept Gaelic culture as the salvation for a world gone mad. In "Lament for the Great Music", he characterises the art of pibroch as follows:

It is the supreme reality (not the Deity of personal theism)  
 Standing free of all historical events in past or future,  
 Knowable - but visible to the mind alone;  
 Wherefore the Church for its own purposes borrowed  
 The method you carried to perfection, and in plain-song  
 Found the musical voice of a dividuality  
 Which has no communal link with mankind  
 Though, having the mystic association of primitive music,  
 It still has the power to work on human superstition.  
 (MacDiarmid 1934/1978: 474)

With *In Memoriam James Joyce*, the artist struggles to achieve the perfection in poetry that he had found the pibroch represented in music. In a symbolic sense, that connects Celtic culture with the ideal of a nascent Scotland, which he had supported throughout his career, but which had temporarily been upset by his experience of Scottish apathy. Accordingly, the bleak Scottish scene, which had brought him to despair in *Cencrastus*, might be redeemed through an emphasis on the nation's Gaelic heritage. MacDiarmid's concern with Gaelic culture inspired him to adapt into English classic Gaelic poems such as "The Birlinn of Clanranald" and "The Praise of Ben Dorain" as well as the composition of poems that refer to Gaelic themes. More significantly in the context of the present discussion, it invited him to reconsider his relationship with Scotland, which is one of the motivations behind *The Islands of Scotland* (1939) and *Lucky Poet* (1943). As a topographical account of the nation, *The Islands of Scotland* adds a geographical dimension to the argument of "Lament for the Great Music". Throughout his introductory section, the writer stresses how life on the Hebrides represents a counterpoint to Lowland Scotland, and such notions bring him to "Island Funeral", a poem that mourns the decline of Gaeldom. "Island Funeral" concludes on an optimistic note: "The cornet solo of our Gaelic islands/Will sound out every now and again/Through all eternity" (MacDiarmid 1939: 36). The timeless qualities of an island existence which is celebrated in "Island Funeral" relates to the perfectionism the poet had discovered in the pibroch and to the core of his Celtic philosophy. It appears somewhat displaced in *The Islands of Scotland*, however, which in spite of its introduction primarily focuses on the Norse archipelagos of Orkney and Shetland.



In *Lucky Poet*, MacDiarmid's ideal of a Celtic Scotland, which embraces artistic perfection and timelessness, is accompanied by an emphasis on the need to recover the nation's ancestral roots. The English hegemony, he claims, has separated the Scots from their Gaelic legacy, and it is urgent that such trends are countered:

Not to go too far afield at the moment, however, while I am dealing with this incredible ignorance of and indifference to the past of our country and its culture in Scotland, and the incapacity of most people to contemplate for a moment any reconsideration of the bases of our national life, or even to display any curiosity or interest whatever, no matter what proofs or probabilities are adduced of premature formulation, masses of evidence at variance with the established conclusions, and new interpretations of the unassailable data even, it must suffice to say that in Scottish history it is precisely as I have said it is in regard to the great pipe-music. (MacDiarmid 1943: 291)

The Borderer MacDiarmid never stops to question whether his own claim to a Celtic past might be somewhat dubious, nor to admit that a majority of Scots have been influenced by their English neighbours rather than a tradition confined to the Highlands. On the contrary, he is guilty of the tendency to underestimate the impact of English culture on Scotland, which Peter Zenziger identifies in his 1989 essay "Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Scottish Literary Criticism" as characteristic of Scottish inter-war writing as a whole (Zenzinger 1989: 148-49). Hence MacDiarmid actively promotes the idea of Scotland as a Celtic nation, for, in his opinion, only the recognition of the country's Gaelic heritage will restore the balance between Highland and Lowland that was temporarily lost as a result of the suppression of Gaelic culture, but on which the re-emergence of Scottish nationhood depends.

Hugh MacDiarmid's crossing of the historical divide between Highlands and Lowlands is symptomatic of the "unity-in-diversity" ideology that moves to the centre of his vision in the late 1930s. As early as 1934, he had adopted a pluralist approach when in *Stony Limits* he demonstrated his mastery of various linguistic codes. Such work underlined his awareness of language difference, but by printing Scots poems next to English, his "Shetland Lyrics" together with "On a Raised Beach", he stressed that his dictions complemented each other rather than competing against each other. Five years later, he managed to combine this ambition to fuse all opposites with the Gaelic theme in his introduction to *The Islands of Scotland*. On the opening page, he describes how Scotland is composed of multitudes of islands:

They are of all shapes and sizes. No symmetry of effect is obtainable. [Scotland] seems to have no control over them. Several groups appear to have escaped from the concerted movement of which she is the centre altogether. And while some remain in groups others are isolated stragglers. It is a chaotic spectacle seen from above. And it is impossible to get them all into focus at once even then. (MacDiarmid 1939: 1)

Although it appears fragmentary, MacDiarmid's jigsaw image of Scotland brings the mainland and islands together into a single vision. Their geologies, histories, climates and inhabitant might differ, but a Scotland that cannot contain such discrepancies, the poet emphasises, is no adequate representation of his nation. In *Lucky Poet*, he elaborates on such a philosophy in the "Direadh" poems, which are included in extracts in the chapter "On Seeing Scotland Whole". In the first "Direadh" poem, he proposes the general thesis that only the spectator who embraces all aspects of Scottishness may grasp his idea of the nation. "Scotland small? Our multiform, our infinite Scotland *small*?" he asks, only to point out how a word like "heather" captures only a fragment of the Scottish landscape (MacDiarmid 1943: 255). He continues the argument in "Direadh II" where from the specific viewpoint of a Border scene, the speaker approaches the roots of his Scottishness. The Lowland bias of "Direadh II" is matched by "Direadh III" where the nation is surveyed from the exposed summit of Sgurr Alasdair on Skye. At the end of that poem, MacDiarmid conjures up an image of Deirdre, a female personification of the Gaelic Idea, which allows him to become one with Scotland. "I am with Alba - with Deirdre", he declares and suggests that this commitment will enable him to overcome all obstacles on his quest for perfection (MacDiarmid 1943: 305). "The Inaccessible Pinnacle is not inaccessible" he concludes with a confidence that is only paralleled by his most militant manifestos of the 1920s (MacDiarmid 1943: 305). Though less bombastic in tone, the finest expression of MacDiarmid's unity-in-diversity motif occurs in the chapter that follows the "Direadh" poems:

So I have gathered unto myself  
All the loose ends of Scotland,  
And by naming them and accepting them,  
Loving them and identifying myself with them,  
Attempt to express the whole.  
(MacDiarmid 1943: 324)

There is no better manifestation of the artist's life-long commitment to Scotland. In comparison with Edwin Muir, it is significant that where Scotland to the latter becomes "that difficult land", MacDiarmid has no quarrel with his nation. He may be at odds



with certain aspects of Scottish life or dismissive of his compatriots when he finds them wanting in terms of his personal standards of Scottishness. Yet the ideal of Scotland is at the centre of his philosophy throughout his career, which indicates that he maintains his optimism with regard to a future for Scotland in spite of his break with the national movement. Critics may object to MacDiarmid's final vision as an impossible dream that has no bearing on Scottish reality in the 1930s. After his trials of the early thirties, it allowed him to come to terms with Scotland nonetheless, which, arguably, makes him the most idealistic representative of the Scottish Renaissance.

## Hugh MacDiarmid in the Scottish Renaissance

Hugh MacDiarmid continued to publish volumes of poetry at regular intervals until the mid-1970s when he was eighty-two years of age. *In Memoriam James Joyce* was sent out in 1955, *The Kind of Poetry I Want* appeared in 1961, while it was only as late as 1974 that the poet finally collected his "Direadh" poems. Fragments of all of these had previously been printed in *Lucky Poet*, however, and it is possible to argue for the autobiography as the conclusion to the productive period of MacDiarmid's career. After that point, he primarily picked up the pieces that he for one reason or other had failed to publish, adjusted them if necessary, then advertised them as newly-written compositions. He had plenty of material to choose from. In an illuminating discussion that occupies the final chapters of *To Circumjack MacDiarmid* W. N. Herbert follows the growth of MacDiarmid's *Clann Albann* project as it becomes *Mature Art*, *Cornish Heroic Song*, *Impavadi Progrediamur* and eventually publications such as *In Memoriam James Joyce*, *The Battle Continues* and *The Kind of Poetry I Want* (Herbert 1992b: 157-225). The aim of MacDiarmid's undertaking was to dwarf all previous accomplishments in poetry, including his own achievement in *A Drunk Man* and *Cenchrastus*. In *Hugh MacDiarmid's Epic Poetry*, Alan Riach sums up Hugh MacDiarmid's later productions under the heading of "epic", a term that underlines the all-inclusiveness that characterises the author's vision:

When MacDiarmid asserted that the scale of the modern epic poem was the only thing it had in common with epics of the past, he provided a rubric under which all the categories I have been considering might be included: the senses of heroism and nationality, the epic subject, and the notion that identity and struggle are inseparable. The term epic itself implies magnitude, inclusiveness, aspiration. Epic poetry is full of beginnings and endings, arrivals and departures; it is advocating and enacting, full of self-proclamation and oppositions. (Riach 1991a: 23)

The poet has come a long way since the writing of his vernacular masterpiece *A Drunk Man* in 1926, yet we should not overestimate the differences between his verse of the 1920s/early 1930s and the work he published at this stage in his career. MacDiarmid's key concerns remain the desire to reach out towards universals from a particularly Scottish stance as well as the perception of the artist as an isolated individual, who may or may not choose to suffer for his Scottishness, but who is aware that he shall have to do so on his own. The author, who in the late thirties sat down to compose *In Memoriam James Joyce*, could not expect a warm reception from his readers, but neither did the drunk persona who in the 1926 poem had abandoned wife and cronies in pursuit of transcendence. New ideas in the 1930s are the Gaelic theme, the imagination of Scotland as a unity-in-diversity and the adoption of a linguistic philosophy that perceives experimentation with different dictions as a way to approach universalism, but neither is incompatible with the poet's earlier beliefs. Hence I will argue that the continuities in MacDiarmid's work supersede his inconsistencies, and that the incorporating vision of his late poetry may be read as the result of a development that might have been slowed down by the occasional rupture, but which as a whole is continuous in nature.

As regards the poet's personal experience, the post-1945 years finally meant a recognition of MacDiarmid's importance within Scottish tradition. Financially, the award of a Civil List Pension in 1950 gave the author the security that had been missing in the 1930s, whilst during the 1950s he became patron of a growing number of young Scottish writers, many of whom practised the literary principles MacDiarmid had advertised in the thirties. The results speak for themselves: the Scots poetry of Sydney Goodsir Smith, Robert Garioch, Alexander Scott and others ensured that literary Scots did not disappear with the representatives of the inter-war revival, while it is likely that the experimentation of Edwin Morgan has been stimulated by the late MacDiarmid. In the 1960s and 1970s optimism characterised the cultural scene in Scotland, which is the beginning of the contemporary revival. Yet the celebration of MacDiarmid had its problems too. The Lallans poets, as the group of Sydney Goodsir Smith, Douglas Young and others, became known, made of Hugh MacDiarmid a cult figure in the manner of Burns, and they were no more receptive to alternative views than had been the Burns Federation which in the 1920s stood in the way of MacDiarmid's Scottish Renaissance. In a personal memoir, Morley Jamieson reveals how Sydney Goodsir Smith would thus



openly protest against the company of the Muirs as if the presence of Edwin Muir in any way endangered the reputation of MacDiarmid (M. Jamieson 1987: 27-28). Eventually, the growing interest in MacDiarmid's art installed him as the grand old man of Scottish literature. In the 1960s and 1970s he was awarded numerous prizes for his life-long contribution to art, in 1970 pictures of him in conversation with Ezra Pound underlined his importance as a modernist innovator, while, in response to his death in 1978, the Scottish Press mourned the loss of a great Scotsman. At last the rebel, Hugh MacDiarmid, had been turned into a national icon.

In the previous discussion I have attempted to map the author's often ambivalent relationship with the Scottish political and literary movements of the 1920s and 1930s. Not surprisingly, MacDiarmid emerges as a key figure in the twenties when his propaganda inspired such writers as Neil Gunn and Edwin Muir to reconsider their ideas of Scotland, but from around 1929 the Renaissance connection becomes increasingly problematic. On the one hand, the writer's recognition that it would be more difficult to awaken the nation than he had originally assumed, made him appear somewhat pessimistic with regard to the prospects for the Scottish Renaissance and Scotland more generally. On the other, he was as insistent as ever to make an impact on Scottish life, which explains his growing radicalism. In *Scotland and Nationalism*, Christopher Harvie sums up his troubles in a reading sympathetic to MacDiarmid:

The literary revival was political in the sense that its cohesion had to be maintained by continual balance and negotiation. MacDiarmid was – almost by his own definition – no politician. But he had acted for so long as the arbiter of the literary movement that he became identified with it. His discomfort actually increased as it became more political, as its journalists and Anglo-Scots didn't share his revolutionary views, or even those of the National Party he had helped found in 1928. The moderate Scottish party was more to their taste, and when amalgamation of two parties loomed in 1933, the left wing of the Nationalists was purged and MacDiarmid went. He had made intellectual concessions to promote the political movement; it rejected him for the conservative establishment. (Harvie 1998: 108)

I think Harvie is wrong to assume that this is merely a question of pro- or anti-MacDiarmid. The extremism that had been the shaping force behind the poet's modernism, is not so easily accommodated within a political grouping. Whatever the national movement tried to do, the author would find a way to undo. He desired the role as hero, the sole martyr that was sacrificed on the altar of Scottish mediocrity, and such a self-image is not congenial with party politics. If the National Party wanted an

electoral breakthrough, it had to steer in the moderate direction of John MacCormick, which explains why it preferred the pragmatic Neil Gunn to the idealist MacDiarmid.

MacDiarmid's radicalism is equally problematic in relation to the Scottish Literary Renaissance as it turned out in the 1920s and 1930s. True, he had himself formulated the principles that in the twenties inspired his contemporaries to break with the past in order to cultivate a vision of Scotland that would contain European modernism as well as Scottish nationalism, but he only lived by that programme himself as long as it was compatible with his literary practice. "Practice before theory", Kenneth Buthlay subtitles his 1989 examination of MacDiarmid's conversion to the vernacular, and that characterises the poet's career as a whole (Buthlay 1989). In the 1930s MacDiarmid would thus argue that Scots was the only language open to Scottish although he had himself turned to English because it made available to him a multitude of dictions that were unattainable in the vernacular. On a similar note, he used his polemics to denounce the Anglo-Scottish hegemony which had promoted English culture to such an extent that Scots had forgotten their Celtic ancestry, but by so doing, he denied the positive influence of English tradition on Scottish literature, without which his modernist verse would have been unimaginable. MacDiarmid advertised numerous extreme ideas throughout his career, but they had little control over his creative mind and may be read as examples of the artist preaching hell-fire in order to make headlines and indirectly promote himself.

The fierce individualism and universalism that come to the fore of MacDiarmid's writings in the late 1930s, are harder to justify within the context of the Scottish Renaissance, for between the poles of the individual and the cosmos, there seems little scope for the demands of nationalism. In *A Drunk Man* the speaker had to choose between a cosmic vision that embraced everything, but by so doing reduced Scotland to a minimum, and a philosophy that placed Scotland at the centre, but confined the author. That paradox underpins MacDiarmid's work as a whole. He may argue in *Lucky Poet* that he can stand on Scottish ground and reach out towards the supreme, but his claim does not always convince as poetic practice. The idea at the core of *In Memoriam James Joyce* combines a desire to express a personal search for absolutes with the notion that all languages may be contained within a universal vision, but that leaves only little room for Scotland. The reader is reminded of Lewis Grassie Gibbon, who in "Glasgow" reveals there is little future for Scots, although that medium may serve him as well as



any until the emergence of “the perfected speech of Cosmopolitan Man” (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 146). Passages occur in the Joyce poem that could be interpreted as expressions of cultural nationalism. One example is the section titled “England is Our Enemy”, in which the poet denounces the English for their inability to create great art, but where in his early prose he had spoken as a Scotsman when he presented his case against the English hegemony, MacDiarmid now adopts the position of the world at large. English ignorance is placed against the accomplishments of France, Germany, Japan and Russia, and even if the conclusion is akin to his ideas of the twenties, the direction he has taken to reach it has altered (MacDiarmid 1955/1978: 858-70). Hugh MacDiarmid seems to be losing track of Scotland somewhere along his road towards world-philosophy, which explains why his later work is less easily accommodated within his original programme for a Scottish Renaissance.

## The periphery moves to the centre: Neil M. Gunn 1926-41

One of the initial respondents to Hugh MacDiarmid's call for a Scottish Renaissance was the future novelist Neil M. Gunn. In what appears to be the beginning of their correspondence, MacDiarmid acknowledges Gunn's "encouraging letter" on the fourteenth of June, 1922, which establishes a connection between the two authors prior to August, 1922, when *The Scottish Chapbook* was launched (MacDiarmid 1922/1984a: 195). In the tenth issue of *The Scottish Chapbook*, which came out in May, 1923, Gunn published his initial contribution to MacDiarmid's Renaissance project in the form of a poem, and between July and December, 1923, that was followed by the short stories printed in *The Scottish Nation*. In his first novel *The Grey Coast* (1926), Gunn tried to depart from past conventions through the construction of a realistic picture of the Highlands that would counterbalance the Romantic imagery of Walter Scott and the Celtic Twilight. MacDiarmid was so impressed by this effort that he in 1926 declared the novelist "[practically] the only young Scottish prose-writer of any promise" (MacDiarmid, *Contemporary Scottish Studies* 1926/1995: 308). Others were less enthusiastic about the author's Highland novels, which seemed to reduce the complexity of modern Scotland to the experience of crofters and fishermen. Prominent among the critics was fellow-novelist Eric Linklater, who in the 1935 essay "The Novel in Scotland" underlined what he saw as the limitations to Gunn's vision:

[Among] the selectivists Neil Gunn is easily the first with his *Grey Coast* and *Morning Tide*: in these books he has done work that is artistically satisfying, but which has little relation to the main stream - such as it is - of Scottish life; they are not Scottish novels in the sense in which Sinclair Lewis's novels are American. (Linklater 1935b: 621)

It is possible to challenge Linklater on two accounts. First of all, he voices the prejudice of a Lowland Scot, who, as spokesman for the nation's cultural majority, found little room for Highland culture within Scottish national experience. Against such an argument, Gunn would argue that a Caithness perspective was indeed representative of Scotland and that it was no more limiting than the vision of Lewis Grassie Gibbon, for instance, which was rooted in the Mearns. Related to this is the second problem, which is the notion of a "Scottish" novel. Linklater is right to emphasise Gunn's geographical specificity, but he ignores the fact that this tendency characterises most Scottish



literature of the inter-war period. There is not a single writer amongst the four that I have chosen to represent the Renaissance, who could not be charged with selectivism. Whether they speak from the Borders, the Mearns, Orkney or Caithness, they appear more comfortable with a rural Scotland than with a country that was becoming increasingly urban, industrial and anglicised, which, in Linklater's view, calls into question the relevance of their art to the nation.

If Eric Linklater chooses to dismiss Gunn as a regional novelist with some artistic merit, but a vision too narrow to be anything but marginal to the nation, Kurt Wittig places the novelist at the centre of the Scottish Renaissance. In the conclusion to *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*, Wittig writes:

It is fitting to end this survey of the Scottish tradition in literature with Neil Gunn. More clearly even than C. M. Grieve he embodies the aims of the Scottish Renaissance. All his strength, his vision, his style come from his people, from the Scottish tradition, from the Gaelic past, but he applies them to the crucial questions of our time. What he has to say is a concern of all men. Scottish literature here is national, yet knows no national limitations. (Wittig 1958: 339)

Paradoxically, Wittig claims it is Gunn's geographical peripherality that, in addition to his philosophical and political conclusions, makes him central to Scottish tradition. In the manner of a Faulkner or a Hardy, he sets out from the surface reality of his own people, the inhabitants of the fishing-creeks and crofting communities along the Caithness-Sutherland coast, but his attempt to reach beneath appearances to the essence of the human condition, "the pattern of life, the underlying ritual, the myth" as Wittig puts it, transcends the physical and spiritual limits of his region in order to ask universal questions and provide universal answers (Wittig 1958: 336). In consequence, it is no longer of any significance whether the narrative is set in rural Caithness or urban Glasgow; the experience of a boy adventurer in the northernmost corner of Scotland gains a relevance beyond regional and national boundaries because it is concerned with the fundamentals of life. The periphery has moved to the centre as the fiction of a Highland novelist becomes representative of Scotland as a whole.

Neil Gunn's main contribution to the national revival of inter-war Scotland is his re-negotiation of the relation between centre and periphery in novels and essays as it is such work that has placed the Highlands so firmly on the map of modern Scotland. As I previously mentioned, he first became associated with MacDiarmid's Renaissance project around 1923 when he began to publish poems and short sketches in *The Scottish*

*Chapbook* and *The Scottish Nation*. In 1926 Gunn published *The Grey Coast*, which marked the beginning of his life-long career as a novelist. Meanwhile, his interest in the national question brought him to join the young National Party of Scotland when an Inverness branch was founded in 1929. By 1930 he was thus active on both the political and cultural fronts of the national movement. Nationalist leader John MacCormick, who became a close friend of the author, recalls in his autobiography *The Flag in the Wind* how debates in the Gunn household of Larachan provided the ideological basis for Scottish nationalism in the early 1930s:

It was for such reasons that in our long discussions in Larachan we constantly reaffirmed our faith, not in any narrow and bitter nationalism, but in the capacity of the Scottish people, given the chance, to reconcile in their politics the freedom and human dignity of every individual with such mass organisation as modern technocracy has made inevitable. We believed that this was the real human problem of our times and that Scotland by virtue of her history, her traditions and even of her size was an ideal testing ground for new solutions. (MacCormick 1955: 48)

Significantly enough, Gunn's nationalism never appeared to be derived from a sense of historical injustice done to the Scots, nor from the prejudice against the English and Irish that only too often dominated the Renaissance polemics of the thirties. On the contrary, his commitment was based on a strong belief in a future for Scotland, which made him stress the potentials of an independent Scotland as well as the need for the Scots to have faith in their nation. Accordingly, he defined Scottish nationhood positively – that is, as a love of the land, its people and its heritage – instead of adopting a strategy that set one nation apart through an emphasis on its difference, superiority and hate. Gunn's insistence on Scotland's racial legacy may bring to mind the “Blut und Boden” principles of fascism, however. “Out of that noiseless world in the grey of the morning, all his ancestors came at him”, he writes in *Highland River*, and to a post-1945 reader this emphasis on blood instincts reads somewhat suspiciously (Gunn 1937/1994: 2). In their biography, Francis Hart and J. B. Pick dismiss any allegations of fascist sympathies. When he visited Germany in 1938, they claim, the author was approached by skilful Nazi propagandists, who eventually realised that “he was of no use for their purposes” (Hart/Pick 1981: 163). The biographers' argument, however, leaves the reader wondering as to whether it is possible to excuse Gunn on grounds of naiveté. Following his return from Germany, he published the essay “As Drunk as a Bavarian”, which celebrates the German way of life, and that suggests that he was either very



impressed by the Nazi regime or had no understanding of what was happening around him. If the latter is the case, Gunn must have been completely out of touch with the international situation in the late 1930s. As early as 1934, Lewis Grassie Gibbon had used his science fiction novel *Gay Hunter* as a warning against fascism, whereas Hugh MacDiarmid, the Muirs, and Eric Linklater voiced their concerns after the Munich Agreement of 1938 (McCulloch 2000 and Linklater et. al. 1938).

Although he may seem more peripheral to the Scottish national movement than outspoken nationalists such as Hugh MacDiarmid and Compton Mackenzie, Neil Gunn played a key role in the Scottish revival of the 1920s and 1930s. On the cultural front he rarely made the headlines in the manner of MacDiarmid, nor did his writings inspire the same controversy as Edwin Muir's and Lewis Grassie Gibbon's. Because he had supported MacDiarmid's Renaissance idea from the 1920s, when most were dismissive of the poet, and because he engaged himself so fully in the attempt to revive Scottish letters, his contribution was crucial nonetheless. In his novels, he challenged the myth of the Highlands that had been developed throughout the nineteenth century by such authors as Walter Scott and Fiona Macleod in order to underline the less romantic aspects of Highland experience. Gunn's sketches depicted life as it was lived in the Highlands, not as people imagined it to be, while his essays in *The Scots Magazine* examined the state of the nation from the detached point of view of his home region, only to conclude that something, nationalism, must be done. Yet the most significant aspect of the novelist's inter-war writings is his consistency. As opposed to MacDiarmid, who saw incoherence as a poetic virtue, or Muir, who sometimes acted as a supporter of the Scottish revival, at other times as one of its fiercest critics, Gunn's vision always seems to be coming from the same source: the integrity of traditional Highland society and its core values of individualism, egalitarianism and co-operation. Begin with a reformation of the individual and the small nation, he would argue throughout his career, and one might establish the basis for an improved relationship between people, nations, which will eventually lead to a new world order where respect for the individual and his creativity rules. In his later fiction he shifted the focus from community to individual and from problems which were specifically Scottish to more general issues, but essentially, his ideological outlook remained the same.

Gunn's most direct contribution to the development of Scottish nationalism is in the area of politics, for, with the exception of Hugh MacDiarmid, he provides the most

obvious connection between the National Party's hopes for the Scottish nation and the intellectuals' call for a Scottish renaissance in literature. The author became an active participant in Scottish politics when in 1929 the National Party arrived in Inverness. As recalled by John MacCormick, the Gunn home was a stronghold for Scottish nationalism, although the novelist's employment in the civil service compelled him to accept the somewhat passive role of party "ideologue" (Hart/Pick 1981: 110). In spite of that, the friendship between Gunn and MacCormick, as well as Gunn's quiet manoeuvres behind the scenes, defined the nature of Scottish nationalism in the thirties. Accordingly, the writer orchestrated the meetings that brought the leaders of the National Party and the Scottish Party together when in 1934 the two factions were heading towards a fusion. On the negative side, such a strong profile within the National Party in the mid-1930s, may have caused a rupture in the relationship between Gunn and MacDiarmid, who had been expelled in preparation for the party merger. In *Neil M. Gunn*, Gunn's biographers note the weakening ties between Gunn and MacDiarmid in the mid-1930s, although they ascribe it to the character of the poet rather than the novelist:

In the 1920s both men were entering their thirties and struggling for voices and places. Suddenly in the 1930s, called by Duncan Glen "the most disturbing and disheartening years of MacDiarmid's tumultuous life," Gunn seemed to move from success to success, while Grieve went through financial disaster, divorce, and poor health, and spent nine years of "penury and poverty" in a cottage furnished with orange crates on remote Whalsay in the Shetlands." In such a position of partially self-imposed siege," Maurice Lindsay has suggested, "the seeds of megalomania find fruitful soil." (Hart/Pick 1981: 115)

Towards the end of the 1930s, Gunn shifted the balance between his nationalist activities and creative writing in favour of his art. In 1937 the success of *Highland River* had encouraged him to become a full-time writer, and as a possible result thereof, his involvement with the cultural and political revival declined. The withdrawal from a position at the centre of the national movement may have been prompted by a number of additional factors. On the one hand, the literary revival was losing its coherence after Hugh MacDiarmid's withdrawal to Whalsay in 1933, the death of Grassie Gibbon in 1935, and Edwin Muir's break with Scotland in 1936. The political movement, on the other, was moving in a different direction as a younger generation, headed by MacDiarmid devotee Douglas Young, challenged the supremacy of John MacCormick.



It is likely that these developments inspired Gunn to reconsider his role within the Scottish Renaissance and the Scottish National Party. He never abandoned his former principles, however. Throughout his career, the writer would take in the Scottish scene from his Highland corner of the world, scrutinise his object carefully, then deliver judgement. The nature of these pronouncements might be critical, but they were rarely dismissive in the manner of his contemporaries. In the 1930s when Hugh MacDiarmid, Edwin Muir and Lewis Grassie Gibbon all developed extreme ideas on the questions of Scottish nationhood, language and culture, and eventually clashed because of it, Neil Gunn remained a stable axis against which their digression could be measured. In consequence, the Highland novelist represents continuity and consistency in the chaos of Scottish inter-war polemics, which is to say that it never appears to be Gunn, who deliberately abandoned the national movement, but the national movement that moved away from Gunn.

I have divided my discussion of Neil Gunn's writings into three stages. My initial part, "Too old and going under", examines the artist's re-mapping of Scottish space in the early novels *The Grey Coast* (1926), *Morning Tide* (1931) and *The Lost Glen* (1932). The second section, "Two Scottish histories", discusses *Sun Circle* (1933), *Butcher's Broom* (1934), *Whisky and Scotland* (1935) and *The Silver Darlings* (1941), which all argue for a necessary rewriting of Scottish history. "The Macdonald at the end of the day", finally, focuses on the ideological questions that come to the fore in Gunn's writings of the late 1930s when he became increasingly preoccupied with maintaining the balance between individual freedom and social responsibility. I shall end with *The Silver Darlings* because I believe the author was changing his priorities at that stage in his development. With *The Silver Darlings*, Gunn is thus moving away from the national question towards issues that are at once more personal and universal, and although I shall make reference to later novels such as *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* and *The Drinking Well*, the different ideas behind these works justify my leaving them out of the main analysis.

### Too old and going under: Neil Gunn's space 1926-32

In "Landscape Inside", a 1959 essay on landscape, internal and external, Neil Gunn stresses his need, as novelist, for a firm grounding in space:

A novelist cannot write about people in a vacuum. They must have a background, and the background becomes part of them, conditioning to

some extent almost everything they do. When this works at a fairly deep level, it can be quite unconscious. I can't remember (though I may be wrong) ever having described a Highland scene for the scene's sake. Always the scene had something to do with the mind of the character who found himself there. (Gunn 1959/1987a: 74)

If it may be hard for an author to withdraw from his native environment, little stops him from redefining that landscape, which is a main concern in Gunn's fiction in the years 1926-32. When the writer published *The Grey Coast*, a novel set in and about the Highlands, it was not the first attempt that had been made to turn that region into a fictional setting. Prior to that, nineteenth-century novels such as Walter Scott's *Waverley* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Kidnapped* had occupied a Highland setting, yet Gunn managed to construct a picture that was unprecedented. The geographical centre of the narrative was no longer the Jacobite country of steep mountains and deep lochs, but the somewhat less dramatic scenery of the Caithness coast. The communities were not the colourful clan societies of Scott, but the grey crofting and fishing townships that a present-day tourist might actually encounter on a journey along the coast. Instead of the romantic battles of the past, the action focused on the everyday struggle for survival, which had embittered the lives of contemporary Highlanders. Accordingly, the predominant mode of Gunn's work was realism, not romance, for, as his contribution to the Scottish revival, he aimed to teach his countrymen to see the Highlands as they were, not as Romantics had envisioned them in the past or desired them to be in the present, in order to emphasise the need for action if that distinctively Scottish way of life was to be preserved. As a result, Gunn's Highlands constituted a bleaker reality than the nineteenth-century reader had come to expect from a Highland novel – a scene encapsulated by the colour grey which embraces the physical, spiritual and cultural landscapes alike.

Gunn's fictional Scotland of the early thirties is dominated by his home counties of Caithness and Sutherland. In "Caithness and Sutherland", a 1935 contribution to the anthology *Scottish Country*, he points out how "Caithness and Sutherland are in a way not easily made plain, a mating of the two great elements of sea and land" (Gunn 1935/1987a: 30). He proceeds with a description of Sutherland, "its mountain masses, its great glens, its hidden lochs, its peat hags, its woods, its barren moors", as against Caithness, "the flat clean wind-swept lands", composed of steep sea-cliffs, hidden fishing creeks and an omnipresent sea (Gunn 1935/1987a: 30 and 26). In early novels



such as *The Grey Coast* and *Morning Tide*, the writer employs a Caithness setting for his plot in order to underline the sea influence upon the lives of these people, whereas the Sutherland element is stronger in *The Lost Glen*, which centres on the confrontation between crofters, who struggle to live off the land, and the incoming gentry who want to see it reduced to a game preserve. Regardless of whether the narrative is located in one or the other of Gunn's home counties, the fiction depicts the human habitat as an insignificant, vulnerable space shut in between sheer precipices of rock, with the vast, empty moorland at the back of the community, the endless, ever-changing sea at front. One of the most powerful evocations of such a landscape occurs in *The Grey Coast*. With his crew, the young fisherman Ivor Cormack has set out for the West Coast fishing from his home village of Balriach, and from a detached sea perspective he now takes in the scene:

The seaboard now swept for miles on either hand, curving just perceptibly from headland to headland in a marginal line of sheer rock-face. A grey strip, backed by far inward moorland crest sweeping eastward, and to westward by broken-backed mountains culminating in a peak that was the fisherman's loadstar, the first far glimpse of approaching homeland. How tiny the croft patches, how insignificant those midden scratchings of the earth! To think that men could live on them, squeeze out of them children and gaiety and rancour and Calvinism and a jealous God! How numerous, too, unexpectedly numerous on a broad survey, the croft houses and scratchings! To think that so many could exist on so little! Pigmy figures, grey molehills of houses, moving specks of cattle beast or horse. (Gunn 1926/1976a: 178)

The passage highlights two central themes within Gunn's writings. On the one hand, the initial part of Ivor's vision stresses man's vulnerability within a hostile, natural environment, measuring the tiny fishing village against a giant landscape of mountains and sea. On the other, the concluding part presents Highland life as a struggle for survival against the very real threats of poverty and deprivation. Both elements influence the outlook of the inhabitants, which means that a close connection is established between the human community and the natural space it occupies.

"Pigmy figures, grey molehills of houses, moving specks of cattle beast or horse" – the words that conclude the above account of Ivor's impressions emphasise the insignificance of human civilisation in nature (Gunn 1926/1976a: 178). For the crofter, the cultivator of those insignificant patches of land, life is a constant fight against a stony ground, changing weather and cattle disease, which leaves him only little security

against accident or misfortune. For the fisherman, life is synonymous with long nights at sea, no guarantee of any catch and the ever-present threat of a sudden storm, which is equally strenuous. Nature is never gentle in this part of the world. On the contrary, it has left man unprotected against the elements as the author explores in the short story "Symbolical", which was first collected in *Hidden Doors* (1929). In this narrative, the protagonist Hendry Macfie, who dwells at his brother's croft, is sent to check upon an ageing crofter couple after the community has been surprised by a sudden snowfall. Hendry arrives at the croft, only to discover that the crofter, Geordie, has disappeared. Hendry follows his footprints in the snow and eventually finds Geordie, an old man who has spent his days struggling to make a living from his stony croft, naked in the snow with a spade in his hand (Gunn 1929: 91). Geordie's nakedness reminds the reader of human vulnerability within a hostile environment. Human beings may cultivate the soil and turn weeds into potatoes. They may build houses to shelter themselves from the wind, but once they are exposed to the full forces of nature, defeat is inevitable. Most Gunn critics recall the scene in *Morning Tide* where Hugh's father comes riding triumphantly on top of the storm. Yet it is worth remembering that the same sea had deprived him of his eldest son on a previous occasion.

The combined effects of a hostile nature and the uncertain gains of crofting and fishing have bleakened the outlook of Gunn's Highland societies, which in spite of the author's enthusiasm for the positive aspects of such an existence, is a world in decline. In the fiction the writer may hide a harsh reality behind a strong sense of community and the comic mood of a ceilidh, but his essays from the 1930s reveal the true state of the region. In the 1937 essay "The Ferry of the Dead", he writes on the decay of crofting:

Where a township is inhabited by the old, by bachelors or spinsters; and the young, who, in the ordinary course of nature, should have inherited the crofts and reared families have departed for the cities or emigrated; then, in the absence of claimants for the land from outside crofting areas, what is going to happen is quite clear; for the very same processes have already been at work in other townships, where the land has gone out of cultivation and become part of a sheep farm or of a sporting estate (...).  
(Gunn 1937/1991c: 50)

The fishing boats are left rotting on the beach, while the crofts are abandoned. The community youth are waiting by the bus stop for a bus that will take them southwards to Glasgow, whilst the old men and women are quietly watching a distinctively Highland way of life disappear. Such images of the contemporary Highlands dominate Gunn's



writings of the early thirties, which suggests that, although he was eager to halt the decline through the encouragement of new developments in the area, he remained uncertain as to whether that was in fact a realistic option. In both *The Grey Coast* and *Morning Tide* the fishermen return empty-handed from their sea voyages to face the lurking ghost of destitution, whilst the crofters of *The Lost Glen* are losing their fight for the land, without which they will be reduced to mere servants for the incoming gentry. The young men of initiative such as Ivor Cormack in *The Grey Coast* and Hugh's brother Alan in *Morning Tide* see little future beyond emigration, and as they depart, they leave behind them only the old men and women who personify a dying culture. As Richard Price recognises in *The Fabulous Matter of Fact*, the colour grey encapsulates this landscape, which Gunn underlines in *The Grey Coast* where he turns "riach", the Scots word for grey or drab, into Balriach, the name of the fictional village in which the narrative is set (Price 1991: 7).

The physical setting gains an added meaning on the spiritual level because of the way it reflects the inner life of the characters. The grey coast of stony crofts and drab rock-faces is mirrored in the bitterness of Jeems, the uncle of *Grey Coast* heroine Maggie, who has seen his years wasted in a struggle against the earth, and who now hopes that his scheme to marry off Maggie to the prosperous farmer Tullach may yet leave him peace of mind. The uncertainties of the sea are personified by Ivor in *The Grey Coast*, who enjoys the freedom of a vast space, but is troubled by a sense of insecurity, as well as *Morning Tide* characters Magnus Sinclair and Morag Fraser, who have grown weary and bitter because the sea has failed to provide. Yet the best example of the interaction between man and his natural environment is probably the scene in *The Lost Glen* where protagonist Ewan Macleod passes through a crofting township, whilst reflecting on the aged appearance of the landscape. Suddenly Ewan sees the cottages adopt the worn, twisted looks of their owners:

This land was too old. Scarred and silent, it was settling down into decay. The burden of its story had become too great to carry.... Ewan's eyes fell on the houses that now seemed to be huddling for warmth, and all at once he saw them mean and wretched, and understood that they were dying, thin-blooded and miserable; they would never more be warm in all time, and the spirit shunned them as it always shunned death. (Gunn 1932/1985a: 58-59)

In a reference to this paragraph, Margery McCulloch describes land and people as "exhausted" in *The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* (McCulloch 1987d: 23). As if to confirm

such an impression, the predominant characters in Gunn's early fiction include the gloom-haunted women who have gained nothing from life but death and disease; the bitter men whose spirits have been killed by their constant struggle to survive; the young men who see hope, but not in their home community, and the young women who fear they will become spinsters once the men have left. *The Lost Glen*, *The Grey Coast* and other Gunn novels from the early 1930s are grey narratives, set in a grey community among grey people, and that apparent drabness is only broken when in 1931 the writer makes a boy the protagonist of *Morning Tide* and consequently adopts a different perspective.

If the spiritual landscape is characterised by gloom and bitterness, there are elements in the Highlands that represent a more positive vision. Nationalism, egalitarianism and co-operation are the corner-stones of the author's philosophy, and they are derived from his insight into life in the crofting and fishing townships he encountered as a child. Within the fiction, nationalism often comes across in the form of a rootedness in Scotland and traditional Scottish qualities which are tested against the new manners brought to the Highlands by incoming strangers such as the Lowland farmer Tullach in *The Grey Coast* and the English colonel Hicks in *The Lost Glen*. Obviously, the wealth of the strangers places them in a more advantageous position than the natives, but even where large-scale sheep-farming and sporting-estates have almost destroyed the crofting and the fishing, the locals are granted an occasional victory. Hence the crofter Jeems goes poaching on Tullach land at night-time and quietly mocks the farmer behind his back in *The Grey Coast*. The Ardbeg crofters refuse colonel Hicks access to their meeting in *The Lost Glen*, while Hugh and Alan defy the authority of gamekeeper and laird when they go salmon-poaching in *Morning Tide*. As regards the principles of egalitarianism and co-operation, the author sees them combined in traditional Highland society. The crofters and fishermen pride themselves on their individuality, a capacity to stand on their own feet, which is why the poorhouse presents such an awesome prospect to Maggie's uncle Jeems. Yet, when poverty strikes and a family faces economic hardship, the community looks after its own. Such interference is never symptomatic of the loss of personal integrity which Gunn portrays in *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, where man has surrendered his freedom to an impersonal, collectivist state. On the contrary, the individual is able to receive the assistance of his neighbours without a loss of status because he is aware that he may be the next who is called upon to provide.



Gunn's model for the way a nation might overcome a hostile natural environment through the communal values of nationalism, egalitarianism and co-operation is influenced by the principles of the Danish co-operative movement, which he discusses in the 1937 essay "A Visitor from Denmark":

Denmark is little more than half the size of Scotland and carries a population of some three and a half millions. A fifth of the country is peat moor or sand. It is flat and without metallic ores, coal, or water power. Yet these Danes, inspired by love of their own land and carrying the ideal of brotherhood in labour into the severely practical business of co-operation, have made of their country one of the most fruitful in the world. The nationalism out of which this magic has been wrought cared nothing for armies and navies and Empire. It concerned itself with the creative work of men's hands; it satisfied the aspirations of individualism while directing these aspirations towards the common good; and when personal needs were thus ordered, it continued organising these adult schools through which the mind may attempt to realise its spiritual potentialities. (Gunn 1937/ 1987a: 171)

Indirectly, the writer's praise for the Danish national project indicates that it may yet be possible to transform the positive aspects of Highland society into a firm basis for a regenerated Scotland. Gunn is aware that it requires a change of mind among the Highlanders themselves, however, who have hitherto lacked the confidence necessary to build a nation. The present pessimism must give way to optimism, but as the author makes clear in "The Ferry of the Dead", that will not happen as long as the young opt for emigration as an easy way out. The initial stage of Highland regeneration, in other words, is to bring the on-going depopulation to a halt as the future of region, and nation, depends upon the spirit of its youth (Gunn 1937/1991c: 50).

A third element in Gunn's Highland landscape is culture, which may be divided into the question of language, Gaelic tradition and continuity. With reference to language, Christopher Whyte claims in *Gendering the Nation* that the author's reconstruction of Gaelic is unsatisfactory to anyone with the slightest knowledge of that tongue (Whyte 1995: 51). In the light of the linguistic experimentation characteristic of the Renaissance literature as such, one wonders how much of a case Whyte actually has. It is probably true that the manner in which Gunn tried to write Gaelic into his English is hardly Gaelic at all, yet the fictional representation of one language in another can never be true to a native speaker. Lewis Grassie Gibbon's use of the Doric was nothing, if not anglicised, whereas Hugh MacDiarmid's Scots brought together dialects from all over Scotland into one, synthetic diction. On a similar note, one may speculate how a native

Gaelic-speaker received the poetry of Sorley Maclean when it first appeared in the 1930s and 1940s, for, inspired by the experimentation of MacDiarmid, Maclean put Gaelic to a modern usage and consequently broke with tradition. As a Highland novelist, Gunn faced an obvious language barrier in his attempt to create a realistic portrait of his home region in fiction. He recognised that the medium of his novels ought to have been Gaelic because that was the ancestral tongue of the Highlands, but he had no Gaelic himself, which confined him to English. In order to compensate for that, and to highlight the linguistic divide between the Highlands and the rest of Scotland, he employed Gaelicised structures in his fiction, which proves that he was at least aware of his difficulties.

The language issue points to the author's problematisation of Gaelic culture as a whole since his personal loss of Gaelic is symptomatic of a more general decline. There were images of Highland life available to Gunn, of course. In the nineteenth century, Walter Scott had transformed the region into a space of dramatic landscapes and melodramatic action, whereas the Celtic Twilight literature of Fiona Macleod had stressed the need to recognise such beauty on the edge of its disappearance, but neither had much to offer the twentieth-century novelist, who wanted a picture of the contemporary Highlands, not a myth of the past. In spite of the writer's desire to break with past sentimentalism, the early fiction is characterised by Gunn's encounter with his literary forebears. In the words of his biographers, the short-story "Half-Light" from the mid-1920s, portray a hero who "has waged a losing battle against 'Fiona [Macleod]'" (Hart/Pick 1981: 72). "Half-Light" tells the story of a schoolmaster who returns to his native Highlands to fight back the Celtic Twilight. He brings school logic and objectivity with him to the north but in the end only Twilight poetry offers any comfort in his confrontation with an extreme nature:

Such a lovely vagueness is poetry, if one could but admit it! Perhaps the making of all great poetry has involved this fight - and this admission. Perhaps the men who have written greatly of the half-light have known the stark realities of the light. Let me say as much, even if I don't believe it yet, for, after all, what do I know of the Ultimates that I should talk of a refuge from them? (Gunn 1929: 73)

The schoolmaster eventually goes missing on the sea, which suggests a final surrender to the absolute. The Celtic Twilight has claimed its first victim, which in a symbolic sense implies that Gunn found the Macleod mantle harder to shed than he had thought it



to be. With *The Grey Coast*, he appears determined to part with the Twilight vision. The novel features another schoolmaster obsessed with Macleod, but where in "Half-Light" such notions had led to a tragic conclusion, they are merely dismissed in the 1926 novel. When Dominie Moffat reads to Ivor a Twilight poem in order to hear the response of a present-day Gael, the young fisherman fails to react as it has no bearing on reality as he knows it (Gunn 1926/1976a: 45). The only culture that appeals to him is what he finds on the Western Isles because that is genuinely Gaelic (Gunn 1926/1976a: 301). A similar opposition of artificial Highland culture, Scott's tartanry and Macleod's Celtic Twilight, and authentic Gaelic tradition occurs in the "Interlude" section of *The Lost Glen*, which has been discussed in some detail by Margery McCulloch in *The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* (McCulloch 1987d: 28-29). In that scene the novelist places traditional Highland airs against quick Dixie tunes, the art of Mackinnon, master of the pibroch, against party piper Macdonald, and present-day Highlanders, who should have been the carriers of their culture, against an incoming expert on Highland tradition (Gunn 1932/1985a: 209-22). The author's intentions are clearly satirical, but the implications are profound. In his "Interlude", Gunn depicts a people that have lost their language, music and tradition, and who are consequently reduced to spectators in the American laird's tartan pageantry.

The image of the modern Highlander, passively swallowing whatever the incomers teach him of his tradition, brings me to the final problem of continuity. One of Gunn's strengths, Kurt Wittig argues in *The Scottish Tradition in Literature*, is his ability to make the past relevant to the present, which leaves the reader wondering how such effects may be achieved in a situation where modern man has lost the connection to his roots (Wittig 1958: 337-38). As a result of the continuous withdrawal of Gaelic language and tradition, the inhabitants of "the grey coast" populate a deculturalised space. On top of that, they suffer from the physical and spiritual disintegration which has been spreading throughout the Highlands since the Clearances, and which only makes Gunn's call for action the more urgent. Hence he writes in the essay "Highland Games" on the condition of his home region:

If it were possible to renew the belief in ourselves, in our Scottish past and culture, I should like to envisage something far greater than has ever yet been attempted, something of pageantry and colour that would quicken the spirit and give to its pride and gaiety an expressive and memorable form. But as the Highland Games have declined in aim and repute, so it is being alleged we as a people have fallen from our ancient

high estate, and in that case I am afraid it would require more than a tinkering with the ways of professional sport to put us where we rightly belong. (Gunn 1931/1991c: 47)

In this manner, the plight of the Highlands becomes symptomatic of the state of Scotland as a whole. The drab village of Balriach represents the grey world of the Industrial Belt too, whereas the bitterness of the crofters is reminiscent of the disillusionment of an unemployed Glasgow worker. From the north, spiritual and cultural disintegration widens out to embrace all of Scotland, which enables Gunn to argue his case for national regeneration from a narrow, regional space.

## Two Scottish histories 1933-41

When Scottish intellectuals set out to redefine their national identity in the 1920s, it was quite natural that they should look for inspiration to Ireland, where such a project had been under way for some time. One example of such cross-cultural links is the way the theories of Irishman Daniel Corkery was adapted to the Scottish situation. In 1924 Corkery published *The Hidden Ireland*, a discussion of eighteenth-century Irish culture, which argued how decades of English rule had taught the natives to perceive themselves as culturally inferior:

The first article in an Ascendancy's creed is, and has always been, that the natives are a lesser breed, and that anything that is theirs (except their land and their gold!) is therefore of little value. If they have had a language and a literature, it cannot have been a civilised language, cannot have been anything but a *patois* used by the hillmen among themselves; and as for their literature, the less said about it the better. In the course of time the natives become tainted with these doctrines; and cry approval when the untruths of the Ascendancy are echoed from some distant place, as if at last a fair judgement has been pronounced, not recollecting that the Ascendancy have had for hundreds of years possession of the ear of the world and have not failed to fill it with such opinions as were opportune. (Corkery 1924/1986: 9-10)

One recognises the argument of Hugh MacDiarmid in "English Ascendancy in British Literature", but Corkery went further than that. Despite the suppression, Irish culture had thrived in the eighteenth century, which leaves a picture of seeming destitution at the surface level, but with cultural strengths hidden underneath. Neil Gunn identified a similar opposition of apparent degeneration and actual continuity within Scottish experience. In *Whisky and Scotland*, which is Gunn's contribution to Gibbon and



MacDiarmid's *Voice of Scotland* series, references to Corkery indicate how important the Irish thesis was to a novelist who was trying to come to terms with his region's tragic history (Gunn 1935: 65). In an attempt to bring the Highland story to a brighter conclusion, Gunn developed not one, but two Scottish histories. One employed the standard interpretation of Gaelic history as a long-term process of defeat, a continuous withdrawal towards the ocean edge in the manner of Fiona Macleod. In contrast, the writer's alternative history argued against this vision in the sense that it read the past in terms of endurance where the individual Gael might suffer, but his tradition lives on.

Gunn's degenerative vision of history begins with a nation divided. To a Scottish nationalist, it was essential to view Scotland as one nation rather than a jigsaw landscape cut across by geographical, ethnic and religious divides, but as a result of past disunity, such a sense of nationhood could not easily be established. In *Whisky and Scotland* "divide and destroy" are identified as the governing principles behind English intervention with the Celtic fringe, and indirectly that policy has undermined the Scottish sense of nationhood (Gunn 1935: 103). In *Sun Circle* and *Butcher's Broom*, Gunn's fictional histories from the mid-thirties, as well as the later *The Silver Darlings* (1941), the novelist's conception of history is applied to the experience of the Gaelic-speaking Highlands in order to underline how the area had been brought to its present state of disruption. Celtic culture, he stresses in *Whisky and Scotland*, was an ancient civilisation which had predated Christ (Gunn 1935: 17). Unfortunately, the golden age of the Celtic world only too rapidly gave way to years of unceasing decline:

In all sorts of ways, by all sorts of peoples, then, that which is Celtic or Gaelic has been driven back to the mountains, driven into the sea. Until at last, among many of the Gaels themselves, a shame of their heritage comes over them, and they have been known to deny it with a curious and introverted hate. (Gunn 1935: 55)

If *Whisky and Scotland* presents the philosophy behind Gunn's history-making, *Sun Circle* and *Butcher's Broom* act out the law of Celtic defeatism. The historical era which the writer focuses on in *Sun Circle* is the early medieval period, when Celtic culture was threatened spiritually by the arrival of Christendom, physically by the Vikings, whereas he sets *Butcher's Broom* in the early nineteenth century, when the Sutherland Clearances deprived the Gael of their land. Both stages are central to the fall of Gaeldom. First a prehistoric, democratic order surrendered to feudalism, then that feudal system was

destroyed by capitalism, which left nothing but "the grey coast" – the landscape of physical, spiritual and cultural disintegration the reader encountered in the early fiction.

*Sun Circle*, which is Gunn's first attempt at historical fiction, is set in a prehistoric society about to enter history. The main characters are the young Druid Aniel and the woman Breeta, who are connected with the old order, as well as the chief's daughter Nessa and the Viking leader Haakon, who represent the new. In order to highlight the opposition between an ancient, pagan and a more recent, Christianised outlook, the author introduces the Druid Master, the bard Taran, the missionary Molrua and the chief's Christian wife Silis, who personify the moral codes in conflict. The plot centres on the arrival of the Northmen, although it is implied from the beginning of the narrative that the culture they eventually destroy, is already a civilisation in decline. Accordingly, the chief Drust, who is first among equals in the original Celtic manner, has married the daughter of a southern king, who is associated with a Christian, feudal order. Silis has brought the missionary Molrua with her to the north in the hope he may convert the tribe to Christianity, and their joint efforts are slowly removing the people from their spiritual roots, embodied by the Druid Master and his disciple Aniel. That is a positive development in the sense that Christendom will bring an end to pagan blood sacrifice and superstition. Yet it cuts the tribe loose from its roots, which according to the Master are in nature and the past:

Our past was in the earth, and our roots are in our past. We live for a little on the surface, drawing from our roots and sending new shoots to the Sun. The earth beneath, the sun above, and we the children of their union. That is all we know, and perhaps all we need to know to find the power that has serenity at its heart. (Gunn 1933/1983: 388)

The Master's words underline why the tragedy of this people is so complete. Christianity may represent a gentler faith than Druidism, but it can only take over at the expense of a spiritual link to the fathers of the tribe, and the effect of such discontinuity is worsened when the Northmen kill the chief, his bard and other carriers of tradition during the short battle on the beach. A final blow to the old order is struck at the end of the narrative where in order to gather the people anew, Aniel travels south to bring back the son of Drust. The new chief has been educated in the south, not in the tradition of his fathers, which is to say that he is associated with a different set of values. As a result, ancient Celtic civilisation has ended with the death of its elders.



The next stage in Gunn's fictional history is the Highland Clearances which are at the centre of *Butcher's Broom* from 1934. The setting of the narrative is the Riasgan, a traditional Highland community located in a fictional Sutherland at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. The plot follows a people's gradual awakening to the looming disaster. Initially, the Riasgan is evoked as a happy community, which exists in complete isolation from the rest of Britain, and which has therefore been able to retain its ancient way of life in an age of transition. Soon it becomes evident that the external reality is closing in on the Riasgan too, however. Within the opening pages of the novel, the young men leave for imperial war, while the women later depart in order to seek work in the Lowlands, and both events underline that it is becoming harder for the community to maintain its self-sufficiency. The growing communication between the Highland village and the outside world eventually draws the attention of external forces to the existence of the Riasgan, which prepares the ground for the land clearances. The agents of Improvement appear in the form of factor Heller and his helpers, who aim to clear the land of its people in order to make it more cost-efficient. Their burning of the houses destroys the old Gaelic order in the literal sense, whilst driving its surviving representatives to the coast where they must struggle to build up a new life for themselves. Yet *Butcher's Broom* is as much about the society that was ruined as the actual tragedy of the Clearances. The clan system that is depicted in the early part of the narrative is founded on the feudal codes that were arriving in the Highlands towards the end of *Sun Circle*. This conception of society recognised the distinction between master and servant, the chief and his/her clansmen, but it was equally dependent upon an awareness of the interdependency of the two. When Heller thus emerges to enforce the evictions, the Riasgan people fail to react because they cannot understand why their superior, the Duchess of Sutherland, should want to hurt them in such a brutal manner. According to the author, the Highlanders' subsequent shame and disbelief are the worst legacy of the Clearances. Hence he allows Tomas the Drover to deliver judgement on the Duchess in the following passage:

For I am cursing her now not for dispossessing the people of their own land, not for having made the law that gave her the power to dispossess her own people, not for having burned them out of their ancient homes, not for having made them wanderers and beggars and eaters of filth, not for the angels of insanity and disease and death she sent amongst them, not even for having tried to justify herself in the eyes of the world by employing an army, by using Christ's Church, by weighting the balances of justice: not for any of these things in themselves, not for any bodily

hurt these may have done us; but because in using all these things, in doing all these things, she has broken the spirit of her people, she has destroyed the soul of her people; as surely as if she were Judas, she has crucified the Gael. (Gunn 1934/1991a: 417-18)

*Butcher's Broom* marks the end of a people's tragedy, with the Gael pushed to the edge of the ocean, their community, culture and spirit broken. From such destitution there seems no way forward, yet, in the manner of Corkery, Gunn manages to see light. Such optimism requires a move beyond *Butcher's Broom*, however, which I consider the author's darkest narrative.

"Tragedy may kill an individual, but it does not kill a people", Gunn's Druid Master reflects in *Sun Circle* and continues: "When a people has been broken, then the broken has to be gathered again" (Gunn 1933/1983: 317). The Master's statement is representative of the writer's reading of Gaelic experience in a wider sense, for although he destroys his communities at the end of *Sun Circle* and *Butcher's Broom*, Gunn continues his account of Highland life with *The Silver Darlings*, which is characterised by a more positive mood. On the basis of that, Douglas Gifford has argued for *Sun Circle*, *Butcher's Broom* and *The Silver Darlings* as a trilogy, where the tragedies of the past are redeemed through the last novel's "song of life" (Gifford *Gunn and Gibbon* 1983: 116). In the 1991 essay "Neil Gunn and the Mythic Regeneration of Scotland", Gifford writes on *The Silver Darlings*:

The triumph of the herring fisheries around the coast of Scotland in the nineteenth century stands as Gunn's ultimate example of a model of regeneration of mythic stature. His recurrent description of the silver darlings as "fabulous", however, doesn't mean that "magic" has brought about salvation – far from it, since it is essential to his purpose that this Scottish myth also stands as realistic model for the nation which he had told MacDiarmid in 1933 was failing because of "internal warring elements". Scott had sought to reconcile these "internal warring elements", as had others after him; but neither in Scott's main efforts, or anywhere else in Scottish literature – not even in MacDiarmid's *Drunk Man* – does supreme art marry so fruitfully with social and historical authenticity and sensitive and persuasive psychological delineation. *The Silver Darlings* has a claim as the greatest of all Scottish novels; and the trilogy it completes, the quest for a new myth which will (...) "explain the origins and ends of a race to itself", has a claim to mark the highest level of achievement of Scottish and Western literature. (Gifford 1991: 99)



Gifford's thesis of mythic regeneration invites two objections. First of all, I do not think that *Butcher's Broom* can be fitted into his argument in a convincing way when one takes into account the physical and spiritual destruction that occurs in that novel. On the other hand, I consider it problematic to use a temporary revival, set within the closed historical epoch of the nineteenth century in the case of *The Silver Darlings*, as the foundation for a vision of Scotland's past, present and future. As I suggested in my introduction to the present section, I prefer the Corkery reading which places a surface history of decline against hidden continuity, because that would justify a shift from a pessimistic to an optimistic mood, whilst underlining how a people can survive against all odds. That leaves the reader with an image of the Gael as a people of endurers; even when they are taught of their inferiority by foreigners, alien to their tradition, or the foundation of their society is undermined by Lowland improvers, their values prevail. In his fiction and non-fiction alike, Neil Gunn portrays the Gael as civiliser rather than conqueror. Ancient Gaelic tradition was derived from the very roots of being, which makes it superior to the artificiality that has replaced it, he emphasises in *Whisky and Scotland* with specific reference to literature:

The old Gaelic poetry was sun-bred, exuberant and yet vigorous, charged with life or the wild singing of death, positive and challenging. There was a flame at its core. Slowly the flame died down; the red faded to grey; the mind became haunted by dreams; and the inheritors of the ancient rigorous tradition entered, like wraiths, the Celtic Twilight.  
(Gunn 1935: 67-68)

Over the years, Celtic culture has slowly been undermined by external forces, but it may be recovered in the manner the Irish reclaimed their hidden Ireland. Underneath the surface twilight, the ancient values survive, which will enable the Scots to redeem their nation.

Although I remain unconvinced by his attempt to make of *Sun Circle*, *Butcher's Broom* and *The Silver Darlings* a great epic cycle, I agree with Douglas Gifford's view that it is in *The Silver Darlings* the author's affirmative vision comes across most clearly. The novel was published in 1941, seven years after *Butcher's Broom*, which could explain the shift of emphasis. That is, in the works of the late 1930s, Gunn had become increasingly preoccupied with the position of man in society, whereas the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 may have been a factor, too. With *The Silver Darlings* the writer begins a new phase in his re-writing of Scottish history in the sense

that he settles for a success story, the rise of the Moray Firth fisheries in the nineteenth century, which had been the foundation of his home town of Dunbeath. In terms of chronology, the narrative begins at the point where *Butcher's Broom* ended, in a coastal township made up by Clearance victims who have yet to learn to extract a living from the sea. It starts in tragedy when Tormad, the husband of the heroine Catrine, and three venturesome friends are surprised at sea by the press-gang. From its initial anti-climax, it is soon transformed into a success story, however. On a communal level, the reader follows the growth of the fishing community of Dunster on the Moray Firth, while on a personal level, the plot centres on Tormad's son Finn's triumphant conquest of the sea. Potential tragedy becomes actual comedy, which underlines the redemptive qualities of Gunn's vision in this work. In relation to Corkery, a central point of the novel is question of cultural continuity. Though they originate in the same culture as Catrine, most inhabitants of Dunster now depend on the sea for their living, which suggests that they have cut their link to the land-based values of their ancestors. In the light of *The Lost Glen* and *The Grey Coast*, that is a cause for concern for these novels demonstrate how the process of deculturalisation had left the lives of contemporary Highlanders empty. Yet the presence of croft-dwellers such as Catrine and her patron Kirsty amongst the fishermen reminds the Dunster community of its roots, which again ensures that the all-important connection to Gaelic tradition is not lost. The significance of the ancestral past is further underlined by the final chapters of *The Silver Darlings*. Finn, who is the mythic protagonist of the narrative as well as a very real person in a very real landscape, journeys to the Western Isles in order to reclaim his heritage. On North Uist, in a poor and primitive crofting township, he finds the old culture alive and realises how its ancient songs bring him to an unconscious understanding, not only of his mother, but of his people:

The effect upon Finn was deep and self-revealing. Love for his mother cried out in him, the love that now understood the withdrawn fatality of the mother. He had been blind, blind. The awful inexorable simplicity of the singing became too much to bear. He tried to put it from him, not to listen; he moved his head and pressed his right heel into the clay floor, so that his body be kept within control. He wanted to cry out, for the relief of the cry. (Gunn 1941/1969: 544)

That a long-forgotten song makes such an impact on Finn only emphasises the continuity of Gaelic tradition despite its upheavals. Christian missionaries may have destroyed Druidic wisdom, while Lowland improvers burned down the Highland



villages. Yet there is something underneath it all that will endure. According to Gunn, there is a hidden Scotland, which equals Corkery's Ireland as a source of national regeneration.

### **“The Macdonald at the end of the day”: Gunn’s vision of the late 1930s**

A scene appears towards the end of *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, Neil Gunn's 1944 fable of modern civilisation, which sums up his vision towards the end of the 1930s. In a final attempt to escape the interrogations an impersonal, bureaucratic administration has imposed upon him, one protagonist, the old Highlander Hector, has demanded to confront the ultimate, God, and is now being led towards that trial. He is nervous for his Calvinist upbringing has made a meeting with God seem like an impossible task, hesitates, then looks to the sky where suddenly he finds hope:

[Hector's eyes] never reached that azure of pure peace, for sitting astride a gargoyle to starboard of the Great Gate, with bare legs dangling and the left hand gripping the stone hair of the gargoyle's head, was the figure of a boy. The right hand saluted and waved, and the mouth in the vivid face opened, and from it came the battle-cry of Old Hector's clan, for Old Hector was a Macdonald, and his clan had many a time found itself sore beset, but never, as its rallying cry showed, had it lost faith, had it lost hope. (Gunn 1944/ 1991b: 237)

The boy is Art, Gunn's personification of a creative, individualist opposition to collectivism, the battle-cry is "the Macdonald at the end of the day", which reminds the old man that he may yet recover strength from his native tradition, and together they represent the twin elements of individualism and nationalism that make up the author's vision. It is crucial that the single human being starts with what little he knows – himself, his regional landscape and national origins – for only on the basis of a firm grounding in space and time can he take in the broader picture.

With *Highland River* (1937), *Wild Geese Overhead* (1939), as well as the autobiographical *Off in a Boat* (1938), the novelist seems to be changing his priorities. The focus of his narratives has shifted from the community to the individual that is shaped by its principles of co-operation and egalitarianism. The concern is less with the recovery of Scottish space and history than with the ideological principles behind his nationalism, whereas the questions that are being asked are no longer peculiar to the Scottish situation, but a response to what is happening all over Europe at the time. A

gap of three years separates *Butcher's Broom*, a novel of Highland history, from *Highland River*, which is concerned with modern man's quest for spirituality. Within that span several events occur that may have altered the author's outlook. On the political front, time had shown that the establishment of the moderate Scottish National Party did not bring about the electoral breakthrough the party leadership had hoped for, whereas the cultural revival had suffered a setback with the 1936 break between Edwin Muir and Hugh MacDiarmid over *Scott and Scotland*. On the international scene, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 strengthened the political polarisation that had been on-going throughout the decade, whilst renewing a sense of catastrophe, total war, as the only possible end to a chaotic decade (Bergonzi *Reading the Thirties* 1978: 55). This sense of imminent disaster pushed British intellectuals towards ideological commitments that had been unimaginable in the 1920s when the modernist principle of "art for art's sake" still ruled supreme. As Richard Johnstone discusses in *The Will to Believe*, English writers such as W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender and Evelyn Waugh playfully adopted one of the two rival creeds of communism and fascism, only to test them against the reality of Spain in 1936 (Johnstone 1982: 1-16). Similar arguments were voiced in the writings of Scottish authors such as Edwin Muir, Hugh MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassie Gibbon, among others, who supported a socialist model for Scotland in the thirties. In contrast, Gunn remained dismissive of collectivism, whether of the left- or right-wing variant, because he saw it as an unnecessary restraint on individual freedom. As early as 1931, he used the essay "Nationalism and Internationalism" to point to an alternative, "third way":

The small nation has always been humanity's last bulwark for the individual against that machine, for personal expression against impersonal tyranny, for the quick freedom of the spirit against the flattening steam-roller of mass. It is concerned for the intangible things called its heritage, its beliefs and arts, its distinctive institutions, for everything, in fact, that expresses it. And expression finally implies spirit in an act of creation, which is to say, culture. (Gunn 1931/1987a: 179)

Towards the end of the late thirties, the writer developed his argument for a balance between nationalism and internationalism, individual and society, in a number of works which raised the question of social responsibility versus personal escape, whilst posing small-state nationalism as the answer.

Is it justifiable for the individual to go in search of delight in the midst of an international crisis? That dilemma appears to have haunted Gunn when in 1937 he



bought a boat and set sail with wife and brother on a voyage of rediscovery around the Western Isles. In *Off in a Boat*, he continuously tries to legitimise his move with reference to the need for essentials, for personal integrity as a counterbalance to the growing focus on man's social duty. Even modern man must face the absolute, "the loneliness of one's own self, which no mass hysteria, or political creed, or religious faith, can save from the last lonely departure that is death", in order to find the truth behind his existence, Gunn observes in his 1938 work (Gunn 1938: 59-60). This leaves the reader wondering whether indeed social responsibility can be as easily shed as that. Political and social issues were to the fore of thirties writings for good reasons. The Depression, and the physical and spiritual starvation of the working-classes that followed in its aftermath, had forced intellectuals to recognise the urgent need for state intervention, if not indeed revolution, if the crisis was to be solved. In the light of that, one could with some justification dismiss Gunn's argument as a failure to face up to the problems of his age. Instead he opts for individualism, the right of all mankind to personal fulfilment, which in practice means the abandonment of all social questions. On the surface, the 1939 work *Wild Geese Overhead* reads as the exception to that rule as the Highland writer appears to be struggling, for once, with the problem of urban destitution. The narrative is primarily set in the cityscape of inter-war Glasgow, a dark world of tenements, disillusioned unemployed and socialist reformers. It brings into focus the conflict between a socialist philosophy, which puts state above individual, and an individualist vision, which may provide an inadequate answer to the social crisis, but which at least respects the individual. That the novelist's beliefs steered him in a different direction from traditional social realism is underlined by a comparison between *Wild Geese Overhead* and Rex Warner's *The Wild Goose Chase*, a marxist novel that had been published two years before. In *The Will to Believe*, Richard Johnstone summarises Warner's work as follows:

The hero, George, possesses the qualities of masculinity, modesty, and courage. In modern society these are no longer recognized as virtues, and he is regarded by his fellow-townsfolk as inferior to his bombastic and effeminate brothers; the society he inhabits is without any shared belief by which George may be judged for his true worth. In the quest which he undertakes for the wild goose, George seeks to re-establish, through social revolution, the connection between the people and the essential values of society; only a truly revolutionary society can convincingly define virtue. (Johnstone 1982: 23)

Warner's protagonist George and Gunn's hero Will discover in the wild geese a symbol of virtues that take them beyond their crisis of disbelief, but they are brought to contrasting conclusions. George finds hope in the prospects of a social revolution that will secure all mankind a decent living in the physical sense of the word. Will, on the other hand, travels through the Glasgow underworld, only to reject such revolutionary creeds. As part of his awakening, he listens to his socialist friend Joe's arguments, accepts the need for change, but he eventually realises that Joe's beliefs are not his own. Spiritually, and physically, his quest takes him to the countryside where he recovers his personal integrity. Before he can fully enjoy his newly discovered haven of tranquillity, Will must shed his Glasgow experience, however. "Their reactions are not our reactions. Your garden here would bore them stiff", he confesses to his lady Primavera, adding that the lives of the proletariat "are not dramatic. They are grey. But they don't feel that greyness as we would. To them the street noises and the grinding trams are their singing-birds" (Gunn 1939/1991d: 325-26). While it may justify his personal choice of freedom over social commitment, Will's comment deprives the underprivileged members of society of the human qualities that set himself and Jenny apart. In *Wild Geese Overhead* escape is thus an option for the few, not the many, which seems paradoxical in the light of the novelist's concern with the integrity of the single human being against the threats of standardisation and dehumanisation.

Gunn clearly felt a need to protect his individualism against allegations of selfishness and social irresponsibility, for in the 1941 essay "Memories of the Months" he observes:

So drawn together are we in fatality that when the individual breaks free from the concerns of the mass, even for a moment, he is affected by something like a sense of guilt. To turn to Nature is to turn away from the dread realities that encompass us, is to escape, and in the act we suspect a weakness, a selfish trifling, which is highly reprehensible and of which we are openly or secretly ashamed. (Gunn 1941/1991c: 85)

More often than not, the author's defence takes the form of an attack on the alternative model of collectivism, however – symbolised by the notion of a beehive-state where nobody suffers because the government will provide. The clearest rejection of state interventionism occurs in the 1944 novel *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* where the Celtic paradise of Tir-nan-og is reimagined as a bureaucratic world-state, deprived of all pleasure and pain. Thirteen years prior to that, the writer speaks out against mass culture, overrationalisation and mechanisation in "Nationalism and Internationalism":



Internationalism carried to its logical conclusion of a single centralisation of all power - arms, finance, law-making - could result in the greatest tyranny the mind of man is capable of conceiving. While the nation is still the unit (and history has shown the small unit to be singularly important – consider Greece and Palestine) the individual factor comes into play, and in a myriad personal contacts the finer elements of humanism are retained and tyranny suffered briefly, if at all. But when the governing machine becomes single in control, remote in place, and absolute in power, then hope of reform or progress - which generally means the breaking of an existing mould - would not have the heart to become articulate. Standardisation would be the keyword not only in the material things of life, but also in the spiritual. And whenever conditions got too desperate it would mean revolution, or world war on a basis of class hatred. (Gunn 1931/1987a: 179)

Gunn's charges against internationalism are that a centralised, impersonal government increases the risk of tyranny, that physical standardisation inevitably results in spiritual uniformity, and that internationalism, not nationalism, is the cause of war and class hatred. With specific reference to socialism, he challenges the theories of reformers such as Joe in *Wild Geese Overhead* because they deprive the proletariat of its humanity, reducing its members to mere objects (Gunn 1939/1991d: 154). Personal experience is of no relevance in the beehive-state; it must be incorporated into a social experience which is larger than the sum of its constituents, and which consequently leaves them dehumanised. "Kind! Surely you need to be kind only where things are not perfect," cottager Robert reminds Hector in *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*: "Where all is perfect, kindness is no more needed" (Gunn 1944/1991b: 74).

Against the uniformity of a collectivist state, the novelist places the virtues of small-state nationalism, which, like traditional Highland society, represent principles that are only too often neglected in a modern world. At the heart of his philosophy is the individual as any suppression of personal freedom is uncreative. To that, he adds the communal values of egalitarianism, democracy and co-operation, which underline the interdependency of the individual and his/her community. Together, the imagination of the single human being and the strengths of an integral society secure a basis for the nation that is at once progressive and conscious of its tradition, of the origins of the present in the past. In the fiction, these considerations come to the fore in *Highland River*. In at least three respects, the 1937 novel represents a departure from Gunn's publications of the mid-1930s, which were predominantly historical in content. First of all, the narrative is set in a contemporary setting. Secondly, it is less preoccupied with

the community and more with the quest of a single human being. Thirdly, it makes references to recent events such as the First World War in order to raise more universal questions. *Highland River* may have been written in response to the international crisis as well as the threat of collectivism, which made it urgent to the novelist to underline the positive aspects of Scottish tradition. While his previous work had thus contributed to the Renaissance recovery of Scottish geography and history, the writer now recognised that he could no longer restrict himself to Scotland, that there were problems in the world of such an omnipresent nature that they had to be faced. Once again he returned to a familiar scene – a remote Highland glen in the north of Scotland – but this time it was in order to emphasise, not where Highland culture had gone wrong, but where it had been right. As he journeys up the river, modern man Kenn, who has witnessed world war and urban destitution, sheds his twentieth-century superstitions until he has regained the connection to his people, a tribe of solitaires with the strength to confront the absolute: “That was his destiny. He saw its meaning in his people, even in their religion, for what was the Calvinist but one who would have no mediating figures between himself and the ultimate, no one to take responsibility from him, to suffer for him” (Gunn 1937/1994: 240). In his combination of individualism, the communal values of his Highland childhood, and his ancestral past, Kenn finds a meaningful alternative. He returns with an awareness of the essentials in life that will enable him to fight back materialism, which again suggests that Gunn's nationalism – a personal compound of individualism, co-operation and tradition – becomes a source of spiritual strength to balance against the present crisis of faith. In “Neil Gunn and the Criticism of T. S. Eliot”, Richard Price connects the novelist's search for integrity to the vision of Eliot, who in *After Strange Gods* argued: “It is only a law of nature, that local patriotism, when it represents a distinct tradition and culture, takes precedence over a more abstract national patriotism” (as quoted in Price 1991/92: 46). At a moment when their contemporaries adopted collectivism as an answer to the crisis, the traditionalists Gunn and Eliot were becoming increasingly wary of potential standardisation and posed region and nation, Eliot's South and Gunn's Scotland, as “spiritual alternatives to centralist decadence” (Price 1991/2: 46).

If the nation constitutes the last barricade against disruptive modernism, it is perhaps not surprising that it also stands as guarantor for artistic merit since creativity can only thrive where the individual is granted full freedom. The poems of Burns and the music



of Sibelius, Gunn would claim, could only have been produced within national communities that remained confident of their heritage, which made it only the more urgent to ensure the survival of the nation. In response to a 1935 enquiry concerning the future of the Scots language, he argued in *The Scots Magazine* how only a restoration of Scottish nationhood might preserve the vernacular (Gunn 1935/1991c: 77-8). If Scotland died, it mattered little as to whether or not its native language would survive:

Unlike Communism or other social creed or manifestation, the Scots Vernacular is an affair exclusively Scottish, and to keep it alive, Scotland must be kept alive. For if Scotland dies, then not only the Vernacular but everything that gives her separate meaning and identity dies with her. In looking therefore for something to keep the Vernacular alive, I should look for whatever body existed with the object of keeping Scotland the nation alive. If no such body existed, then I should know that any concern of mine to finance the Vernacular would be purely antiquarian and of no living value whatsoever. (Gunn 1935/1991c: 77)

As he demonstrated in the 1938 essay "Tradition and Magic in the Work of Lewis Grassie Gibbon", Gibbon was Gunn's favourite example of the interdependency of culture and nation, for, to the Highland writer, *A Scots Quair* had proved how valuable a national basis was for the artist.

As well as acting as a stimulus for the arts, Gunn recognised a secure grounding in national culture and tradition as a necessary foundation for a harmonious world order. Post-1945 readers have dismissed nationalism as a creed which inspires hate among neighbouring peoples, but to Gunn that was never the case. True nationalism, he observed in "A Visitor from Denmark", was free from imperialism, conquest and war, because it was based on a belief in oneself and one's country (Gunn 1937/1987a: 171). Such confidence enabled the nationals to engage with the physical and spiritual building of their homeland in the manner of the Danish national awakening in the nineteenth century. Once the nation had come into its own, it would be able to interact with other nation-states, but because they were equally free and secure, there was no cause for rivalry or war. People could meet across national boundaries to exchange culture and rejoice in the new variety of life as the writer stresses in "Nationalism and Internationalism":

Culture thus emerges in the nation, is the nation's flower. Each nation cultivates its own natural flower. The more varieties, the more surprise and pleasure for all. For nationalism in the only sense that matters is not jealous, any more than music is jealous. On the contrary, if we are gardeners or musicians we are anxious to meet gardeners or musicians of

other lands and rejoice when their blooms are exquisitely different from our own. In this way life becomes enriched, and contrast is set up as a delight and an inspiration. (Gunn 1931/ 1987a: 179-80)

This passage encapsulates the author's position. Only the fertile soil of a nation allows the individual's creativity to flourish, but once a national tradition has emerged, it requires the diversity of an international audience to appreciate it. In consequence, "[nationalism] creates that which internationalism enjoys" (Gunn 1931/1987a: 177).

In conclusion, I shall return to the scene from *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, which introduced the present section. Protagonists Art and Hector have been caught up by a dehumanised, overrationalised administration, which is trying to reduce human complexity to materialism, emotions to psychology; that administration is now threatening to bring down Hector, who has lost the childish spontaneity that allowed Art to escape. Hector retains an instinctual awareness of his home community and its tradition, however, which is the key to his salvation. When Art shouts to his friend the ancient battle-cry of the Macdonalds, he reminds Hector of an alternative to the beehive-state, the values of the Highlands and small nations alike, which may yet see him through, and that epitomises the writer's nationalism. Crisis and war loom large at the end of the 1930s; the modern philosophies of collectivism and materialism are reducing life to a question of bread-and-butter politics, while artistic integrity is undermined by the rise of mass culture. Yet Gunn defies it all through his concept of nationalism as a source of spiritual and creative renewal.

### Neil Gunn in the Scottish Renaissance

In a sense, Neil Gunn's 1946 novel *The Drinking Well* represents his final attempt to fictionalise the Renaissance ideal of national regeneration. The narrative follows Iain Cattanach, the son of a Grampian sheep farmer, as he leaves his home community for a city career, only to recognise that the land offers the only desirable way of life. The protagonist's initial migration from the land to the city brings to mind novels such as *The Grey Coast* and *Morning Tide* where the image of the young men waiting for the Glasgow bus was used to highlight the problem of rural depopulation. As Margery McCulloch discusses in *The Novels of Neil M. Gunn*, the primary concern of *The Drinking Well* is the hero's return to the Highlands, not his departure, however, and in a thematic sense that is reminiscent of *The Lost Glen* where the protagonist had returned



in disgrace from Edinburgh University (McCulloch 1987d: 120-21). As for Ewan in *The Lost Glen*, Edinburgh turns out to be an unhappy choice for Iain. Following a confrontation with a superior in his office, he travels back north where he struggles to make good with his father, girlfriend and village. While in Edinburgh, he has been drawn to the idea of Scottish nationalism, on the basis of which he now develops a strategy for the Highlands that will stimulate economic growth, whilst retaining the area's cultural values. Iain imagines that the decline of his home region may be halted by the introduction of a system that combines cattle and sheep in the manner of the pre-Clearance Highlands. This scheme requires investment, however, which puts it beyond the capacity of the average farmer. For a while, it looks as if Iain's grand vision of Highland regeneration is bound to shipwreck against the rocks of conservatism, apathy and poverty. Yet Gunn is unwilling to let go of his ideal, and in order to effect the desired change, he introduces the benevolent laird Henderson, whose assistance enables Iain to recover both land and princess in a fairy-tale like conclusion. According to his biographers, the novelist was unhappy with a fantastic ending to what he intended as a realistic work (Hart/Pick 1981: 204). More than any other Gunn novel, *The Drinking Well* thus shows how difficult it was for the author to take his nationalist vision beyond the closed historical epoch of *The Silver Darlings* or the fabulous realm of *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* into a contemporary setting, which may explain why the direction of his fiction changes after 1946. As Richard Price concludes in *The Fabulous Matter of Fact*, *The Drinking Well* is "the last time Gunn delivers a myth for specifically Highland and Scottish rejuvenation" (Price 1991: 149).

Strictly speaking, Gunn's later novels are irrelevant to a discussion of the novelist in relation to the Scottish Renaissance. The author remained loyal to his Highland roots in the sense that he continued to employ Highland settings and characters, but where the community had been to the fore of his inter-war writings, it was now reduced to a background, against which the protagonist's search for fulfilment was played out. Philosophical questions replaced the writer's nationalist agenda in a move reminiscent of Hugh MacDiarmid's search for absolutism in late writings such as *In Memoriam James Joyce*. In the essay "Comedy and Transcendence in Neil Gunn's Later Fiction", Francis Russell Hart sums up Gunn's post-war development in the following words:

During the Second World War, with the mythic dystopia *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (1944), there occurred in the fiction of Neil Gunn an expansion or a displacement of theme into urgencies of the mid-

twentieth-century world. They are anticipated most clearly in *Wild Geese Overhead* (1939), a first novel of violence, physical and intellectual, in a modern urban setting. Two later variants of the same "fiction of violence" are *The Shadow* (1948) and *Blood Hunt* (1952). It appears, as well, in two novels that use popular and contemporary "suspense" or intrigue motifs, *The Key of the Chest* (1945) and *The Lost Chart* (1949). But Gunn's ultimate form was the one Edwin Muir recognised and admired in *The Silver Bough* (1948), and we see it likewise in *The Well at the World's End* (1951) and in *The Other Landscape* (1954). It is the ageing modern intellectual's quest into primordial place and atavistic time for his own renewal, his search for the displacement that enigma can bring, bewildering him onto "The Way" or giving him divinely comic nudges onto the "other landscape". (Hart 1973: 239)

I consider Hart's celebration of the late Gunn unfortunate in the sense that it has encouraged critics such as John Burns and Richard Price to focus on the post-war novels instead of the inter-war period when, in my opinion, the novelist made his main contribution to Scottish literature. *The Drinking Well* proves how hard it was for the author to hold on to his nationalist beliefs after World War Two, which may explain why his late novels become less concerned with the Renaissance vision. Whereas *The Grey Coast*, for instance, had engaged with the social, economic and cultural problems of contemporary Scotland, the narratives of the late 1940s and early 1950s shift the emphasis to the individual's search for fulfilment. According to Francis Hart and J. B. Pick, the post-1945 works represent a "more intellectual, more difficult, more complex" dimension to Gunn, but I am not convinced (Hart/Pick 1981: 199). On the contrary, I see these "mature" novels as a retort to the Celtic Twilight which the artist had defied in *The Grey Coast* through the character of Ivor. In *The Other Landscape* (1954), the mad composer Menzies is thus defeated by the sea in a manner not unlike the schoolmaster of the early short story "Half-Light". It could be argued that Fiona Macleod triumphs at the end of Gunn's career, when the nationalist author who had successfully moved his home region to the centre in the 1920s and 1930s, appears to be withdrawing to the margins once again.

The differences between the early and the late Gunn raise concerns with regard to his status within the Scottish Literary Renaissance, for whereas certain of his novels are easily accommodated within a programme for national regeneration, others are more peripheral. As I suggested above, the dividing line is around the end of the Second World War. Up till the publication of *The Drinking Well* in 1946, the writer had been seriously engaged with Scottish politics and culture. From 1922, he had been a loyal



supporter of Hugh MacDiarmid's campaign for a revival, while he in the 1930s orchestrated the meetings that eventually brought the National Party of Scotland and the Scottish Party to a merger. Such priorities were reflected in his work, which means that majority of Gunn's writings between 1926 and 1946 were coloured by a Renaissance ethos. Although strong Scottish novels such as *The Silver Darlings* and *The Drinking Well* had yet to emerge, the first symptoms of a changing outlook manifested themselves towards the end of the thirties, when in *Wild Geese Overhead* the writer opted for a more individualist answer to the dilemmas of life. That coincided with a period when he was becoming less involved with nationalist politics, whereas he would have found it difficult to maintain a presence in a cultural grouping that was speedily dissolving in the aftermath of the *Scott and Scotland* controversy. In consequence, he was less tied by his previous commitments in the late 1930s, which left him free to pursue his personal goals. Gunn's growing individualism was at the expense of his programme for national regeneration. Late novels such as *The Silver Bough* (1948), *The Lost Chart* (1949) and *The Well at the World's End* (1951) were Scottish in content, but the emphasis on national renewal that had characterised inter-war writings such as *The Lost Glen* and *Morning Tide*, was in these novels exchanged for a focus on personal redemption. The Renaissance element had disappeared, in other words, in a manner that makes the late Gunn seem somewhat marginal to the present discussion.

A second problem with Neil Gunn as a protagonist of the Scottish Renaissance is his geographical peripherality. In my introduction I compared Kurt Wittig's perception of the novelist as the key figure in the modern revival with Eric Linklater's more sceptical view, and although my discussion has tried to underline how Gunn aimed to transcend his marginality, the issue must be confronted by the reader. Even if he occasionally ventured into urban Glasgow or rural Lanarkshire, the primary source of Gunn's fiction remained the Highlands, which raises the question of whether or not such a physical and spiritual foundation is too narrow for him to be speaking for the nation. Caithness and Sutherland, which were his preferred locations, are rural counties dependent on a unique combination of crofting and fishing, as well as an awareness of their Gaelic heritage. Such a vision may represent the Highlands, of course, but it has very little in common with that other Scotland which is urban, industrial and anglicised. How can Highland life ever become symptomatic of a modern reality that has moved beyond such traditional values centuries ago, the Lowland Scot might ask Gunn, who would answer:

Because Highlands and Lowlands constitute the same nation and thus reflect different sides of a shared national experience.

The most fundamental difficulty I have encountered in my attempt to accommodate the vision of Neil Gunn within a generalised Renaissance programme, is neither his change of outlook in the late 1930s nor his scope, however, but his inability to turn his nationalism into a contemporary myth of revival. In *The Silver Darlings* he presents a vision of regional regeneration, which is based on individual integrity and co-operative organisation, but within the wider picture of Scottish experience his optimism cannot prevail. The narrative evolves within a closed historical epoch, which he cannot move beyond. At the end of the novel, the reader thus learns how the economic basis of the Moray Firth fishing is being eroded. The “song of life”, which Douglas Gifford identified in *The Silver Darlings*, is fading, only to be substituted by the destitution that characterised Gunn’s portraits of his contemporary Highlands in *The Grey Coast* and *The Lost Glen* (Gifford Gunn and Gibbon 1983: 116). The author’s other attempts to fictionalise his vision for Scotland fare no better. In *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, he demonstrates how traditional Highland values may transform the beehive-state into an improved society where the positive aspects of individualism and collectivism are brought together, but the plot unfolds within a fantasy world, which makes its conclusions hard to apply to Scottish reality. In *The Drinking Well*, on the other hand, Gunn seems determined to prove that his ideas might function within a contemporary setting, only to realise the difficulty of such a task. In order to bring his narrative to a satisfactory end, he introduces an external force in the shape of laird Henderson, and such a move is more reminiscent of romance than realism. Although he had developed his nationalist philosophy in his non-fiction throughout the 1930s, he is unable to create a realistic vision of Highland regeneration in the fiction. In the end, he resorts to romance and fable in a manner that seems to weaken his case for Scotland.



## From Scotshire into the Mearns: Lewis Grassie Gibbon 1928-35

In 1934, the year Neil Gunn published *Butcher's Broom*, Hugh MacDiarmid and Lewis Grassie Gibbon sent out *Scottish Scene* as a joint effort. MacDiarmid's campaign for a Scottish Renaissance, which had by then been under way for more than ten years, had established his name in Scottish culture and politics. Gibbon, on the contrary, had only made his name as a Scottish writer as recently as 1932, when *Sunset Song* appeared, yet his contributions to *Scottish Scene* were as uncompromising in their approach to Scotland and the Scots as any by MacDiarmid. In the essay "Literary Lights", Gibbon thus declared fellow-novelist Gunn un-Scottish on the grounds of language:

Mr. Gunn is a brilliant novelist from Scotshire who chooses his home county as the scene of his tales. His technique is almost unique among the writers of Scotshire in its effortless efficiency: he moulds beauty in unforgettable phrases – there are things in *The Lost Glen* and *Sun Circle* comparable to the best in the imaginative literature of any school or country. He has probably scarcely yet set out on his scaling of the heights. . . . But they are not the heights of Scots literature; they are not even the pedestrian levels. More in Gunn than in any other contemporary Anglo-Scot (...) the reader seems to sense the haunting foreignness in an orthodox English; he is the greatest loss to itself Scottish literature has suffered in this century. Had his language been Gaelic or Scots there is no doubt of the space or place he would have occupied in even such short study as this. Writing in orthodox English, he is merely a brilliantly unorthodox Englishman. (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 200)

As a critique of Gunn, Gibbon's argument is problematic: on the one hand, he does not take into account the fact that the Highlands were traditionally Gaelic-speaking, which makes Lowland Scots no more appropriate as a medium for Gunn as the Standard English he employed. At the same time, Gibbon ignores the difficulties confronted by a novelist who had lost the speech of his ancestors, and who therefore had to find other ways of communicating a sense of difference. As an insight into Gibbon's own approach, "Literary Lights" is no more satisfying. The Mearns writer might suggest that only literature composed in Gaelic or Scots qualifies as Scottish, but his practice failed to live up to such generalisations. Throughout his career, he published works in Standard English as well as Scots, and his last novel, *Gay Hunter* (1934), was written entirely in the imperial tongue. Despite the radicalism of *Scottish Scene*, Gibbon was

anything but consistent, which places him in a somewhat dubious position vis-à-vis the Scottish Renaissance.

Before I examine his place in Scottish inter-war literature in more detail, I want to stress that Lewis Grassie Gibbon was in a sense the odd-man out. There are several reasons for this. First of all, he was by far the youngest in my company of four. Edwin Muir, Hugh MacDiarmid and Neil Gunn were born towards the end of the nineteenth century, which made them the contemporaries of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot. This generation came into its own during the first decades of the twentieth century, which meant that it experienced the 1914-18 war from an adult perspective. In contrast, Gibbon was born in 1901, which places him in the same group as Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and Christopher Isherwood. They were too young to participate in the First World War; they started to make their impact on British culture in the 1930s, and their art sprang from the physical and spiritual depression that followed from the war rather than the war itself. In addition to the generational gap, Gibbon stands out in Scottish inter-war writing because of his premature death. While Muir, MacDiarmid and Gunn were active for more than thirty years, most of Gibbon's writings were produced between 1928 and 1935, which makes it hard to trace any development in his ideas. Accordingly, his work offers no vision comparable to those of his fellow-writers. He is inconsistent at best, self-contradictory at worst, which indicates that he had yet to come to terms with himself, Scotland and the world at large. Related to this is his relatively late arrival on and early departure from the Scottish scene. By the time *Sunset Song* was published in 1932, the pioneer stage of the Scottish Renaissance was coming to a close. Muir and Gunn had both contributed to MacDiarmid's campaign for a cultural revival in the mid-1920s, but after 1925 MacDiarmid's editorial activities ceased, which somewhat restricted the outlets for Renaissance propaganda. In the early 1930s *The Modern Scot* tried to fill the vacuum left by *The Scottish Chapbook* and *The Scottish Nation*, but this periodical was less radical in orientation, which alienated Gibbon. Hence the novelist characterised *The Modern Scot*'s approach to culture as "castrated, disembowelled, and genteelly vulgarized" in the essay "Glasgow", as if to suggest that it catered for a middle-class readership with no real understanding of such matters (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 138). Gibbon's early death, on the other hand, prevented him from participating in the dispute that developed after Muir's publication of *Scott and Scotland* in 1936. In hindsight, that is ironical, for, as the original editor of



the *Voice of Scotland* books, Gibbon had himself invited Muir to contribute his study of Scott. Yet it reconfirms my impression of the novelist as a peripheral figure within the inter-war revival.

In spite of such differences, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's influence on Scottish literature in the 1930s is beyond doubt. With the exception of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, *A Scots Quair* is probably the most influential work to have come out of the Scottish Renaissance, for, in a manner reminiscent of MacDiarmid's best poetry, Gibbon's trilogy combined a strong sense of Scottishness with a more universal quest for meaning. As in the case of MacDiarmid, the key to the novelist's art was language. In 1935, Eric Linklater reflected in "The Novel in Scotland":

Whatever one may think of his politics, it may safely be said that Gibbon was the only Scots writer of his generation to dare suppose that playing football with the cosmos was his chosen mission. But he was an audacious person. To invent a new prose rhythm and write three full-length novels in it was plumed and high-horsed audacity; and to come so near success as he did was to demonstrate the genius that justified it. (Linklater 1935b: 623-24)

*A Scots Quair* was composed in the author's personal blend of Standard English and the Doric of his native North East. Prior to 1932, the Doric had been used in the vernacular verse of Charles Murray, Violet Jacob and Marion Angus, but since the publication of William Alexander's *Johnny Gibb of Gusheutneuk* in 1871, no novelist had employed Scots as his/her primary vehicle, which made Gibbon the first to try out in prose what MacDiarmid had achieved in poetry. With *Sunset Song*, it would seem, Scotland had found a novelist who was ready to meet the poet's challenge and, indirectly, hasten the transformation of the Scottish novel from nineteenth-century romance to twentieth-century modernism. The initial part of Gibbon's trilogy was met with enthusiasm by associates of the Scottish Renaissance. "You have written what may well be the most important Scottish novel since *The House with the Green Shutters*. This is the real Scotland at last", George Malcolm Thomson wrote to the author in August, 1932 (Munro 1966: 74-75). Glasgow novelist James Barke called *Sunset Song* "the greatest Scottish book in the English language" in a letter that marks the beginning of a friendship that lasted until Gibbon's death (Munro 1966: 92).

It is unlikely that Lewis Grassie Gibbon would have had such influence on Scottish letters had *A Scots Quair* been interesting as a linguistic experiment only. In addition to its stylistic concerns, the trilogy engaged with issues that were central to Scottish culture

in the 1920s and 1930s, including the general revaluation of Scottish geography, history, literature and religion that I considered in my initial chapter (pp. 33-48). In terms of space, the author located his narrative in a landscape that was at once fictional and plausible to a Scottish audience in the thirties. As history, *A Scots Quair* dramatised the process of modernisation which over the past decades had transferred most of the population from a rural society into the city. Through characters such as John Guthrie and Robert Colquhoun, the novelist examined Scotland's Presbyterian legacy, whereas his conclusion to the prelude of *Sunset Song* underlined his ambition to depart from the literary conventions of Kailyard and anti-Kailyard alike:

So that was Kinraddie that bleak winter of nineteen eleven and the new minister, him they chose early next year, he was to say it was the Scots countryside itself, fathered between a kailyard and a bonny brier bush in the lee of a house with green shutters. And what he meant by that you could guess at yourself if you'd a mind for puzzles and dirt, there wasn't a house with green shutters in the whole of Kinraddie. (Gibbon 1932/1995a: 24)

Besides the trilogy, Gibbon's engagement with Scottish matters shows in parts of his early fiction, the short stories and essays of *Scottish Scene*, as well as various polemics, reviews and public letters. Such material is supplementary to *A Scots Quair*, however, on which the author's reputation as spokesman for the Scottish Renaissance rests.

Even if *A Scots Quair* asserted his Scottishness through such elements as language, history and geography, the writer had little patience with the political philosophy behind the inter-war revival. "What a curse to the earth are small nations!" he declared in the essay "Glasgow" in the beginning of an argument that brought him to condemn recent state formations such as Finland, the Irish Free State and Latvia (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 144-45). In spite of such anti-nationalist polemics, Renaissance colleagues Gunn and MacDiarmid both tried to accommodate his ideas within a nationalist framework. Gunn's 1938 celebration of the Mearns writer, "Tradition and Magic in the Work of Lewis Grassie Gibbon", claimed that the author's creative practice, which Gunn interprets as an example of cultural nationalism, underlined the inadequacy of Gibbon's ideological cosmopolitanism (Gunn 1938/1987a: 102). MacDiarmid went a step further in *The Company I've Kept*: not only had Gibbon eventually come around to ideas reminiscent of MacDiarmid's Scottish Renaissance but "[in] politics too he gravitated to Communism and became an out-and-out Republican (MacDiarmid 1966: 224). The



novelist had converted to the poet's Red Scotland manifesto, in other words, which is surprising, given that it was only launched in the years following Gibbon's death.

Although I think that Gunn and MacDiarmid's efforts to read into Gibbon their personal philosophies of nationalism and Scottish republicanism misrepresent the Mearns writer's politics, there is evidence to suggest that he was less secure in his ideological commitment than the polemical parts of "Glasgow" imply. In an early letter to MacDiarmid, dated on the twenty-first of January, 1933, he asked whether or not the poet thought communism and nationalism were compatible (Gibbon 1933d). On a similar note, he confessed to Gunn in November, 1934, that "I'm not really anti-Nationalist. But I loathe Fascism and all the other dirty things that hide under the name. I doubt if you can ever have Nationalism without Communism" (Gibbon 1934c). Gibbon's ambivalent feelings about Scottish nationalism are demonstrated at the end of "Glasgow", which up to this point had been critical of such ideas:

I am a nationalist only in the sense that the sane Heptarchian was a Wessexman or a Mercian or what not: temporarily, opportunistically. I think the Braid Scots may yet give lovely lights and shadows not only to English but to the perfected speech of Cosmopolitan Man: so I cultivate it, for lack of that perfect speech that is yet to be. I think there's the chance that Scotland, especially in its Glasgow, in its bitter straitening of the economic struggle, may win to a freedom preparatory to, and in alignment with, that cosmopolitan freedom, long before England: so, a cosmopolitan opportunist, I am some kind of Nationalist.  
(Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 146-47)

To some extent, the writer's ideological confusion may be excused on grounds of his youth or the incomplete nature of his vision. Yet Lewis Grassie Gibbon is not the only associate of the Scottish Renaissance who was unable to make up his mind on the national question, as I shall return to in my discussion of Edwin Muir.

I have structured my examination of Gibbon around the three parts of *A Scots Quair* because they are central to his reputation as a Renaissance author. My initial section, "Grassie Gibbon's art of community", focuses on the construction, and deconstruction, of rural Scotland in *Sunset Song*. The following part, which I have titled "Between the old Scotland and a new", centres on *Cloud Howe*, which I consider the narrative most clearly related to the Renaissance revaluation of Scotland, and which as a result offers a bleaker portrait of Scottish life than its companion volumes. "Where tradition and modernity meets" examines *Grey Granite*, which takes the story into an urban environment that may represent the writer's own present. In the course of my argument,

I will refer to works published under Gibbon's real name of Leslie Mitchell, as well as various short-stories, essays and polemics. Most of these are peripheral to the Scottish Renaissance, however, which is why I have decided to leave them out of the main discussion

### **Grassie Gibbon's art of community: 1930-32**

Among the first to recognise the significance of *Sunset Song* was George Malcolm Thomson, author of *Caledonia* and other books on Scottish affairs. "If you have not already done so, get hold of a novel *Sunset Song* by L. G. Gibbon, whoever he or she may be", he advised Helen B. Cruickshank in a 1932 letter, then continued: "It seems to me the pioneer of something new and very interesting in Scottish letters. Perhaps the first really Scottish novel" (as quoted in Munro *Leslie Mitchell* 1966: 74). Thomson's words are representative of the enthusiasm and curiosity, with which the emergence of a new novelist was met in Scotland. "I don't know who you are, though I have several suspicions, all involving your sex", Donald Carswell wrote in a personal letter to the novelist, which indicates how puzzled Gibbon's contemporaries were by the identity of an author that seemed to have come from nowhere to produce a narrative more consciously Scottish than anything hitherto attempted by the novelists of the Renaissance (Munro 1966: 74). Yet the truth of the matter was that Gibbon had arrived at *Sunset Song* after a long development as Compton Mackenzie recognised in his *Daily Mail* review:

I have no hesitation in saying that *Sunset Song*, by Lewis Grassie Gibbon, is the richest novel about Scottish life written for many years. Mr Gibbon is the first of our contemporary Scottish writers to use the dialect with such effect....There is internal evidence that he had already struggled hard to require a mastery of English prose before he ventured to approach his present task. It is experience which has given him the right to experiment. (as quoted in Munro 1966: 75)

As Mackenzie notes, Gibbon's growth is most obvious in terms of language. As early as 1924, he had demonstrated his stylistic awareness when he opened the short-story "Siva Plays the Game" with a juxtaposition of the rival vocabularies of romance and realism (Gibbon 1924/1967: 190). The plot of the short-story centres on the clash between life in an Arab village and the way it has traditionally been conveyed to a Western audience by adventure writers such as Rider Haggard, and such thematic concerns anticipate *Sunset Song* which insists on a more realistic account of rural Scotland. The narrative



concludes with a letter in which the Oriental heroine gives away the ploy. In a linguistic sense, this letter is interesting because of the style which highlights Zöe's lack of proficiency in English and, by so doing, underlines the communication gap between the Arab and the Western world (Gibbon 1924/1967: 196). At the same time, it represents an early attempt by Gibbon to present in writing a kind of speech that is supposedly alien, colloquial and lower class. Six years later, he developed such techniques in his first novel *Stained Radiance*. The protagonist of the narrative is Thea Mayven, a peasant-born Scot who has moved to London. In the capital, she enters into a relationship with would-be novelist John Garland, and the combined influence of Garland and her un-Scottish surroundings distance Thea from her Scottish origins. The conflicting views of Thea, a modern woman, and the Leekan peasants, amongst whom she grew up, are brought home in chapter five where Thea and Garland visit the north. At the station they are picked up by Thea's father, whose colloquialisms contrast with the Standard English of the main narrative:

Speaking to his daughter, his tone was admonitory and full of a shamed pride and amazement, for he was still, spite the passage of the years, uncertain as to whether her conduct in refusing to become a bit servan lassie an milk kye an keep a man's house – na, na, she wad hae none o that, but maun learn shorthan and siclike stuff and gae stravaigin awa to London – was decent and profitable, or not. (Gibbon 1930/1993: 84-5)

Even when his intentions are ironic as in the paragraph above, Gibbon's occasional use of Scots in the early fiction suggests an awareness of the potentials of the vernacular as a prose vehicle. Hence he had already been experimenting with the Doric when he chose it as the medium for *Sunset Song*.

On a similar note, there are parallels between the geographical and historical landscape of *A Scots Quair* and the Scottish settings for Gibbon's early works. Temporarily, *Stained Radiance* brings Thea and Garland back to the Mearns village of Leekan, a small farming community that in a geographical sense occupies the same space as Kinraddie. Leekan is further explored in the author's second novel, *The Thirteenth Disciple* from 1931, which is partly autobiographical. The narrative follows peasant-born Malcom Maudslay's growth into a modern-day reformer. Before he can fully embrace the radical ideas of his age, Malcom must escape the limitations of his Scottish background, and it is in this rendition of an isolated, backward community in the North East that Gibbon approaches the landscape of *Sunset Song*. Like Kinraddie,

Leekan is composed of small crofts, the Manse and the school, as well as prehistoric sites which play a symbolic role reminiscent of the Standing Stones of Blawearie. The village is placed between the North Sea and the Grampians, which, as the novelist argues, has left it in a marginal position in relation to the rest of Scotland:

Leekan Valley is in Aberdeenshire, a cleft in the Grampians mountain-block, lying roughly parallel with the North Sea. The winter howling of that three-miles distant sea must have been among the first sounds heard by Malcom. Though a valley, Leekan is at a high elevation, except at the point where a glacier has torn down its eastern wall in anxiety to provide a site for a fishing village. Neither Lowland nor Highland, it is a place without history, though the national hero of Scotland, Sir William Wallace (...), is supposed to have hidden in a yew-tree near the present manse during the early days of the rebellion against the southern aliens. (Gibbon 1931/1995c: 3)

The geographical details of this space, as well as the tone in which it is evoked, bring to mind "The Unfurrowed Field" of *Sunset Song*. The fictional landscape of Kinraddie was not new to the author when he sat down to write *Sunset Song*, in other words, but was a setting he had been developing over a period.

Even if *Stained Radiance* and *The Thirteenth Disciple* prove the novelist's previous awareness of language, geography and history, Lewis Grassie Gibbon changed his approach to such material in *Sunset Song*. Where in the early narratives Leekan Valley had primarily functioned as the background against which the growth of Thea and Malcom was played out, the community of Kinraddie was at the centre of the 1932 novel. At the same time, *Sunset Song* dramatised the recent history of Scotland, which had seen a rural order give way to a modern, industrialised society, where the previous works had been concerned with the intellectual development of a few key figures. With *Sunset Song*, Gibbon shifted his attention away from abstract theories of society to his personal experience of the rural North East, and nowhere is that as apparent as in his treatment of history. Since the publication of Douglas Young's pioneer work *Beyond the Sunset* in 1973, Gibbon has famously been associated with the anthropological school of Diffusionism, which reached a height during the inter-war years. The main spokesmen for this thesis were Grafton Elliot Smith, W. J. Perry and H. J. Massingham, who were connected with University College, London. In *Beyond the Sunset*, Douglas Young sums up their ideas on human evolution as follows:

The Diffusionists believed that primitive man lived in a kind of golden age. He was a hunter and food-gatherer rather than a food-producer, a



nomad roaming the world in innocent contentment. He had no laws to curb and confine him and there was no need for them; in his pristine state man was kind and generous and sociable. There was no governmental authority for no such thing as a state existed prior to the emergence of civilization. There was no religion and no externally imposed moral code, no taboo, no sense of sin. And there was peace in the world for war did not yet exist. (Young 1973: 10)

Although non-fictional works such as *The Conquest of the Maya* and *Nine Against the Unknown*, as well as the novels *The Thirteenth Disciple*, *The Lost Trumpet* and *Image and Superscription*, put Gibbon's sympathy for Diffusionism beyond doubt, I cannot accept the matter-of-fact way in which Young places all the author's writings within this ideological frame. In *Sunset Song*, for example, a Diffusionist reading may be questioned on a personal, a communal and a philosophical level. With reference to the protagonist, Douglas Young claims that the development of Chris Guthrie represents the history of mankind more generally. "Her early state of innocence and happiness is destroyed by the encroachment of civilization", the critic points out, but he discards the fact that the narrative effectively starts with the removal of the Guthries from Echt to Kinraddie, which is to say that Chris misses out on the initial state of harmony (Young 1973: 95). On a communal level, Kinraddie fits uncomfortably within a Diffusionist frame. Diffusionist theory ascribes the corruption of humanity to the spread of agriculture in the prehistoric era, and, indirectly, such a theoretical stance would make Gibbon's rural Scotland symptomatic of decline. Douglas Young bases his argument on the character of John Guthrie, whose wretched mind is associated with the physical and spiritual deterioration that in the Diffusionist view followed upon the dawn of history (Young 1973: 97). Kinraddie is also home to positive characters such as Chae Strachan and Long Rob, however, and arguably *Sunset Song* is as much a celebration of their strengths as a condemnation of Guthrie's weaknesses. As a vision of history, *Sunset Song* transcends Diffusionism altogether. In the 1992 essay "Letting the side down", Keith Dixon points out how to Elliot Smith and Perry, the Diffusionist notion of a Golden Age was applied to the past exclusively, where to Gibbon it represents the future (Dixon 1992: 280). Hence it is the era that will come, not the epoch that has passed, which Robert Colquhoun celebrates in his closing sermon:

*Nothing, it has been said, is true but change, nothing abides, and here in Kinraddie where we watch the building of those little prides and those little fortunes on the ruins of the little farms we must give heed that these*

*also do not abide, that a new spirit shall come to the land with the greater herd and the great machines.* (Gibbon 1932/1995a: 256)

*Sunset Song*'s conclusion looks to a new Scotland that cannot be accommodated within the conservatism of the Diffusionist school. Where previous works such as *The Thirteenth Disciple* and *Three Go Back* might have been intended as testing grounds for Diffusionism, *Sunset Song* fictionalises the process of modernisation, which the author had himself witnessed as a child in the Mearns, and on which he realised the future would depend. As a result, *Sunset Song* is dynamic in a way that Diffusionist anthropology was not.

Intriguing as they have seemed to critics such as Young, it was not Gibbon's ideas on history as much as the strength of his imagined community that appealed to his Scottish contemporaries. One of the original ambitions of the Scottish Renaissance was to produce an image of Scotland that would challenge the sentimentalism of nineteenth-century culture. Neil Gunn had attempted that in *The Grey Coast* when he derived a landscape from his native Caithness, which on the one hand countered the flawed imagery of Walter Scott and Fiona Macleod, whilst, on the other, providing a symbolic setting for his narratives. With Kinraddie of *Sunset Song*, Gibbon went one step further: though clearly rooted in reality, Gunn's communities were entirely fictional, which is to say they had little bearing upon real people and spaces. Gibbon's landscape, in contrast, drew upon factual elements to an extent that is perhaps only rivalled by Yoknapatawpha County which William Faulkner had invented for his novels of the 1930s. "The Unfurrowed Field", which opens *Sunset Song*, places Kinraddie firmly on the map of Scotland. The location of Kinraddie, Ian Campbell establishes in his 1988 essay "Lewis Grassie Gibbon and the Mearns", is identical with the space that in the real landscape was occupied by the novelist's home village of Arbuthnott (Campbell 1988: 15). On a similar note, Thomas Crawford's notes to the Canongate edition of *Sunset Song* indicate to what extent the events and figures referred to in the prelude, also featured in the history of the Mearns. One example is Dunnottar Castle, which brings Chris to reflect upon the tragic fate of the Covenanters; another is William Wallace, who had also appeared in *The Thirteenth Disciple* (Gibbon 1932/1995a: 125 and 2-3). In spite of such geographical and historical verisimilitude, Gibbon himself drew attention to the fictionality of his landscape. In the essay "The Land", he described the imaginative



process that enabled him to reduce his native country to the elements he required as a setting for art:

Beyond the contours of Drumtochty, through the piping of that stillness, snipe were sounding. I got off my bicycle to listen to that and look round. So doing I was aware of a sober fact: that indeed all this was a little disappointing. I would never apprehend its full darkly colourful beauty until I had gone back to England, far from it, down in the smooth pastures of Hertfordshire some night I would remember it and itch to write of it, I would see it without the unessentials – sweat and flies and that hideous gimcrack castle, nestling – (Good God, it even *nestled!*) among the trees. I would see it in simplicity then, even as I would see the people of the land. (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 300)

Although restrained in comparison with other parts of *Scottish Scene*, this paragraph offers one of the most illuminating comments on the author's creative practice. For, even if Kinraddie is rooted in Arbuthnott, it is first and foremost an aspect of Gibbon's imagination, which is to say that it makes little sense to compare the fiction to the demography of the real-life Mearns. In the 1978 discussion "Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* and the Peasantry", Ian Carter attempts that, only to be brought to the conclusion that Gibbon plays around with the facts (Carter 1978: 173). Hence Kinraddie is shaped by a fusion of real places, authentic history and the novelist's personal recollections, but it is because of the manner in which Gibbon puts his pieces together that it comes across as one of the strongest inter-war images of Scotland.

To the author's achievement in terms of geographical and historical verisimilitude should be added the stylistic devices that allowed his community to speak. The most famous aspect of Grassie Gibbon's art is his choice of a literary language derived from the Doric as that seemed to relate *Sunset Song* to the linguistic politics of Hugh MacDiarmid. MacDiarmid had published his first Scots lyrics ten years prior to the appearance of Gibbon's novel, which could suggest that it was his experimentation that had inspired the novelist's use of Scots. There is nothing among the Leslie Mitchell papers to support such a claim, however, which is to say that Gibbon's choice of a vernacular medium for his fifth novel may have been motivated by other factors. With reference to that, it is interesting that James Joyce's *Ulysses* had been published in 1922, for the Irish novelist's development of a literary vehicle from spoken rather than written idioms offers an alternative source for the Grassie Gibbon style. On the Scottish side, Gibbon may have been familiar with Nan Shepherd's *The Quarry Wood* which had appeared in 1928. Though less radical in approach than MacDiarmid and Joyce,

Shepherd employed the North East dialect in her narrative, and it is possible that her example inspired Gibbon to write in Scots. Whatever the reason, Gibbon was aware that he was doing something unprecedented when in 1932 he opted for the Doric. In the note that introduces *Sunset Song*, he justified his decision in the following terms:

If the great Dutch language disappeared from literary usage and a Dutchman wrote in German a story of the Lekside peasants, one may hazard he would ask and receive a certain latitude and forbearance in his usage of German. He might import into his pages some score or so untranslatable words and idioms – untranslatable except in their context and setting; he might mould in some fashion his German to the rhythms and cadence of the kindred speech that his peasants speak. Beyond that, in fairness to his hosts, he hardly could go: to seek effect by a spray of apostrophes would be both impertinence and mis-translation. (Gibbon 1932/1995a: xiii)

The author concludes: “The courtesy that the hypothetical Dutchman might receive from German a Scot may invoke from the great English tongue” (Gibbon 1932/1995a: xiii). The final words underline the status of his literary Scots as a mongrel, not a true representation of the Doric. It is a synthetic Scots, which, in the words of Ian Campbell, enables English readers to “comprehend the majority of the language, since intrusion is minimal”, yet allows a Scottish audience to benefit from “familiar sentence-patterns, or ambiguous words such as ‘brave’ and ‘childe’ which mean one thing to a Scot, another to an English reader coming new to the prose” (Campbell *Lewis Grassie Gibbon* 1985a: 53). On top of that, the joint effects of a vernacular vehicle and the stream of consciousness technique create the impression of a communal narrator. Certain sections of *Sunset Song* are clearly told from the point of view of protagonist Chris Guthrie, others by an anonymous voice of Kinraddie, but ever so often, the two perspectives blend into one. The implications are two-fold. On the personal level, it identifies Chris as a member of her community, not the outsider she becomes in *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite*, where the barriers between individual and society are less easily overcome. In social terms, the manner in which the different voices of the community come together, creates the image of a homogeneous world where co-operative forces prevail. As a narrative strategy, the Grassie Gibbon style thus reflects the innate character of the society that is depicted in the novel, whilst communicating through language a Scottish sense of difference.

In conclusion, it is necessary to return to Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s history, for, although his evocation of Kinraddie is probably the principal strength of the narrative,



*Sunset Song* portrays a world in transition. That the system of small-holding, which constitutes the economic foundation of rural Scotland, is coming to its close is emphasised from the start. In "The Unfurrowed Field", Gibbon describes how the last of the Cospatric lairds had tried to improve his estate through land clearances: "on the cleared land he had bigger steadings built and he let them at bigger rents and longer leases" (Gibbon 1932/1995a: 5). The laird's manoeuvres are significant on two levels. On the one hand, they underline the transience of Kinraddie. One of the characteristics of the nineteenth-century Kailyard, Edwin Muir noticed in *Scottish Journey*, was the escape to "Scotland's past, to a country which had existed before Industrialism" (Muir 1935/1985: 67-8). The Kailyard was set in a Scottish landscape, in other words, which appeared to have stepped out of time, and which might consequently offer a myth of endurance. By stressing the dynamic aspects of Kinraddie, Gibbon defies that myth of timelessness. Although Chris seeks a vision of permanence to place against the rapid flow of history, the only reality that is left at the end is change, which leaves no room for Kailyard nostalgia. Within the socio-historical frame of *Sunset Song*, on the other hand, the laird's clearances mark the beginning of a transformation from the old system of small-holding to the rising order of capitalist-farming. "As the son of a tenant farmer in Kincardineshire", David Craig observes in "Novels of Peasant Crisis", "[Gibbon] was placed to write the final account – in *British* literature – of a people whose place of work and working-team was one and the same as their own homes and families" (D. Craig 1974: 51). The first character to realise the impact of such a process is John Guthrie. In "Drilling", Guthrie's encounter with the malicious gossip of Kinraddie leads him to the following reflections:

Now also it grew plain to him here as never in Echt that the day of the crofter was fell near finished, put by, the day of folk like himself and Chae and Cuddiestoun, Pooty and Long Rob of the Mill, the last of the farming folk that wrung their living from the land with their own bare hands. Sign of the times he saw Jean Guthrie's killing of herself to shame him and make of his name a by-word in the mouths of his neighbours, sign of a time when women would take their own lives or flaunt their harlotries as they pleased, with the country-folk climbing on silver, the few, back in the pit, the many; and a darkness down on the land he loved better than his soul or God. (Gibbon 1932/1995a: 75-6)

Though Guthrie's bigotry undermines his reliability as a witness, his predictions reveal the author's ambivalent feelings about modernisation. The rise of large-scale farming at the expense of crofters such as Guthrie is a negative development. *Sunset Song's*

positive figures such as Chae Strachan, Long Rob and Chris's first husband Ewan are associated with crofting, but they are removed by the 1914-18 war, which, in addition to killing off the peasantry, provides conditions favourable to a capitalist take-over. As a result, big-scale producers such as Ellison and the Sinclairs thrive, while the rest of Kinraddie is wasted. On the positive side, the transition may put an end to the narrow-mindedness that had caused Guthrie's suppression of his family. Similarly, it might reform the behaviour of certain members of the community, whose malicious gossip and beastly ways hardly live up to the standards of a Kailyard idyll. In spite of the co-operative and egalitarian tendencies of rural Scotland, which are brought home by the section in *Sunset Song* where all Kinraddie meets in an effort to save Peesie's Knapp from fire, there are other aspects of that society which are less than ideal.

Whether for good or bad, the agricultural landscape of Kinraddie occupies a temporary stage within Grassie Gibbon's Scottish history. "[When] I read or hear our new leaders and their plans for making of Scotland a great peasant-nation, a land of little farms and little farming communities," the author declares in "The Land", "I am moved to a bored disgust with those pseudo-literary romantics playing with politics" (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 295). Gibbon continues:

They are promising the New Scotland a purgatory that would decimate it. They are promising it narrowness and bitterness and heart-breaking toil in one of the most unkindly agricultural lands in the world. They are promising to make of a young, ricketic man, with the phthisis of Glasgow in his throat, a bewildered labourer in pelting rains and the flares of head-aching suns, they are promising him years of a murderous monotony, poverty and struggle and loss of happy human relationships. They promise that of which they know nothing, except through sipping of the scum of Kailyard romance. (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 295)

Even if such denunciation of rural life reads somewhat unconvincingly within an essay that celebrates the countryside, it serves as a warning to the reader of *Sunset Song*. In spite of the elegiac tone of the sermon that concludes Gibbon's narrative, Colquhoun's commemoration of the peasantry should not be misread for nostalgia. *Sunset Song* is set within a closed historical epoch, which means there can be no going back to the order it portrays. Kinraddie's War Memorial carries the names of Chae, Long Rob and Ewan; the crofts of Peesie's Knapp, the Mill and Blawearie are abandoned, whilst the oldest inhabitant of the community, Pooty, has been taken to an asylum. A final survivor remains in Chris, but not for long. The new minister, Robert Colquhoun, will take her



out of Kinraddie and into the burgh of Segget, which, on a figurative level, reflects the ongoing modernisation. The old Scotland is dead at the end of *Sunset Song*, whereas a new vision has yet to emerge.

### Between the old Scotland and a new: *Cloud Howe*

With his 1933 sequel to *Sunset Song*, Lewis Grassie Gibbon moved closer to the situation of his contemporary Scotland. Geographically, *Cloud Howe* is set in the burgh of Segget, which represents a transitory phase between country and city and therefore brings together the rival systems of agriculture and industrialism. In terms of chronology, the narrative follows the development of Scotland from the end of World War One to the late 1920s. During those years, it became increasingly clear that economic conditions were deteriorating, whereas the political priorities shifted from national reconstruction to class war. The crucial event of the 1920s was the 1926 General Strike, which occupies a central position in *Cloud Howe* as well as in other Renaissance works such as Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. On the role of the strike to writers of Gibbons' generation, Samuel Hynes observes in *A War Imagined*:

[The] comparison is to a war; but this one is a *political* war. The political Thirties may be said to have begun here, for this generation at least. And with the intrusion of politics, and especially of left-wing politics, into the intellectual lives of the young, Modernism changed direction, and became something else – a literature of engagement that faced forward, towards the next world war. (Hynes 1992: 422)

Within the context of the Scottish revival, *Cloud Howe* is central on two accounts: on the one hand, it is the part of Gibbon's trilogy that is most easily accommodated within the general Renaissance re-examination of the Scottish scene. On the other, it reflects a growing concern with politics, which will eventually place the author in an ambiguous position in relation to the Scottish movement. With regard to the former, the reader should note the dedication of *Cloud Howe* to George Malcolm Thomson. As the quotation which introduced my analysis of *Sunset Song* reveals (p. 127), the journalist had been among the early respondents to the first part of *A Scots Quair*, and from such enthusiasm, a friendship evolved between the novelist and Thomson, which could explain Gibbon's gesture. Yet there might be more to it than that. Even if his efforts were overshadowed by the achievement of creative writers such as MacDiarmid,

Thomson was a key figure on the Scottish scene in the 1930s. Politically, he was one of the founding members of the Scottish Party, which challenged the supremacy of the National Party in the early 1930s. As Alistair McCleery discusses in “The Porpoise Press 1922-26”, Thomson was also involved with the establishment of a Scottish independent press, which would print the early work of Neil Gunn, among others (McCleery 1985a). Thomson’s main contribution to the Renaissance was his publication of such “studies” of Scotland as *Caledonia or The Future of the Scots* (1927) and *Scotland That Distressed Area* (1935), however. These books claimed to provide a neutral survey of the political, economic and social state of the nation at a time of crisis, although Thomson’s figures only too easily led him towards a nationalist conclusion. Gibbon’s awareness of such work is beyond doubt for he refers to the author of *Caledonia* in a 1929 letter to Alexander Gray (Gibbon 1929: 4). In the light of that, I will argue for a connection between *Cloud Howe*, which examines the state of small-town Scotland in the 1920s, and the “Condition of Scotland” genre, which suggests that Gibbon’s dedication was intended to draw attention to the narrative as part of the Renaissance programme of revaluation.

If in a thematic sense *Cloud Howe* reflects one of the predominant Renaissance structures, Gibbon’s ideological beliefs differ from those of his fellow-Scots. In *Scotland That Distressed Area*, Thomson’s analysis brought him to a vision that, not surprisingly, expressed the nationalism of the Scottish Party. In contrast, Gibbon wanted his fiction to prepare the ground for communism as he admitted in a 1933 letter to James Barke:

Cloud by Day had been used by another of my publisher’s authors – damned impudence, wasn’t it? So I clouded the Howe instead. Don’t think the English should have much difficulty in pronouncing it. It’s a much better book than Sunstroke Song – a fact confirmed by the preliminary rumbles of disapprobation I hear all around me from Burnsians and Scots ministers who lapped up vol. 1. . . Seriously, I think it suffers a bit from the necessity to demolish so many superstitions in order to clear the way for the blatant communism of Grey Granite.  
(Gibbon 1933c)

Although the Barke letter indicates that Gibbon was confident enough in his communism to plan his entire trilogy as a gradual progress towards that ideal, the fiction suggests he was less secure in practice. *Image and Superscription*, which came out prior to *Cloud Howe*, measured religious fundamentalism against an odd blend of



Diffusionist, anarchist and communist theory, but it failed to convince. Meanwhile, *Cloud Howe*, which was meant to reveal the inadequacy of Labourism, conservatism and Christianity as solutions to Scotland's crisis, pointed to no alternative. As a result, the author left his readers in an ideological vacuum that could be ascribed to the clash between idealism and realism, commitment and doubt, which characterises so much of his writing.

Like *Sunset Song*, *Cloud Howe* attempts to channel the Scottish experience through a single community. In terms of social history, Segget represents a more modern type of society than Kinraddie, which is to say it has fully embraced the principles of capitalism and industrialism that were only beginning to make an impact on rural Scotland in the previous narrative. The opening chapter implies that the writer wanted Segget to equal Kinraddie as an imagined world. In the manner of "The Unfurrowed Field", the prologue of *Cloud Howe* tries to define a place for the burgh in the history and geography of Gibbon's fictional Mearns. An initial description of the landscape is followed by an account of the past, which explains the growth of Segget from the Middle Ages to the narrative present. *Cloud Howe*'s "Proem" is shorter than the prelude of *Sunset Song*, which is due to the absence of the map of Kinraddie that concluded "The Unfurrowed Field". Where in *Sunset Song*, Gibbon would thus place every one of his characters within the community, the population of Segget is not examined in any great detail, which is perhaps inevitable, given the size of the burgh. On a symbolic level, the lack of details reflects the nature of the small-town. Whereas Kinraddie was presented as a relatively homogeneous society, Segget is portrayed as a divided world, which would make the townsfolk less familiar with their neighbours. The only knowledge the Segget voice seems to access is the less than ideal behaviour of certain representatives of the burgh, and although that may provide a basis for the comic interludes that occasionally interrupt the main flow of the narrative, it cannot create an image of Segget that matches Kinraddie.

Gibbon's history of Segget is dominated by internal disunity. The beginning of such fragmentation is dated to the arrival of industrialism in the burgh, which, in addition to a new economic system, introduced new machinery, new inhabitants and the first symptoms of class war:

[The] jute trade boomed, the railway came, the two jute mills came, standing out from the station a bit, south of the toun, with the burn for power. The Segget folk wouldn't look at the things, the Mowats had to

go to Bervie for spinners, and a tink-like lot of the creatures came and crowded the place, and danced and fought, raised hell's delight, and Segget looked on as a man would look on a swarm of lice; and folk of the olden breed moved out, and builded them houses up and down the East Wynd, and called it New Toun and spoke of the dirt that swarmed in Old Toun, round about the West Wynd. (Gibbon 1933/1995a: 6)

By the 1920s, the process of disintegration has been completed. Politically, the spinners are socialists, whereas the Segget establishment remains conservative in orientation. Economically, the working-class is the first group to be touched by the Depression, which causes the closure of the mills and thus unemployment, where it is only at a relatively late stage that falling trade figures convince the middle-class that all is not right. In terms of social circumstances, the Old Toun dwellers suffer from poverty, malnutrition and disease, from all of which the New Toun is exempt. To that, Gibbon's narrative technique adds a sense of spiritual dissociation. The language of the narrative, for instance, points to a failure of communication. Where all Kinraddie spoke in the same vernacular idiom, the dialogue now shifts between dense Scots, Anglo-Scots, Standard English and laird Mowat's parodic public school accent, which increases the reader's impression of disunity. As regards narrative perspective, the Segget voices are individualised and competitive where in *Sunset Song* Chris and Kinraddie had blended into one another. Within the opening pages of "Stratus", the reader encounters the points of view of Chris, her son Ewan as well as various Segget burghers, and while these may complement each other, they never become one (Gibbon 1933/1995a: 109ff.).

Into a disunited Segget arrives at the beginning of the narrative Chris Guthrie and her second husband Robert Colquhoun. The importance of Colquhoun to the trilogy was already implied in *Sunset Song* where, as the new minister of Kinraddie, he preached the sermon that, on a figurative level, closed the age of the peasantry. Where the 1932 novel told the stories of Chris and Kinraddie, however, *Cloud Howe* is concerned with her husband and his struggle to reform Segget. As a character, William Malcolm observes in *A Blasphemer and Reformer*, Colquhoun is "both 'the comrade of God'" and "a go-ahead billy" (Malcolm 1984: 145). Malcolm continues:

[His] sincere humanitarianism transmutes on a political level into a fairly radical form of Christian Socialism, as his Armistice Day sermon in "Cumulus" prophesying mankind's heroic recovery from the carnage of the war demonstrates. *Cloud Howe* follows Robert's quest to put his political ideals into practical operation, and as the spinners emerge as the most socially repressed body within Segget, and also the most politically



active and aware, at the end of "Cumulus" his political hopes, to the dismay of the local bourgeoisie, inevitably come to rest on them.  
(Malcolm 1984: 145)

As a representative of the Kirk, Colquhoun reflects the positive aspects of Calvinism, which is interesting in the light of the general Renaissance denunciation of Presbyterianism. In "The Antique Scene", Gibbon had praised the heroic efforts of church radicals such as John Knox and the Covenanters, however, who in their time had dared challenge the status quo, and he would probably place the Segget minister within the same category (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 30-33). In terms of class, the minister belongs to the establishment, but his sympathy lies with the spinners, which is to say that he tries to span the communal divide. Yet his hopes for a reformed society, which are derived from his combined values of Christianity and socialism, founder on his failure to communicate. In the midst of a Scots-speaking world, Colquhoun stands aloof as a speaker of Standard English, which underlines his inability to enter into a dialogue with the factions of Segget. Accordingly, the middle-class complains about the socialism they hear in his sermons because it compromises their social position, while the spinners name the minister "Creeping Jesus", as if to imply that he substitutes religion for social justice (Gibbon 1933/1995a: 174).

The developments of minister and town come together in "Stratus", in which the 1926 General Strike hits Segget. In preparation for confrontation, the burgh splits into two parties. The spinners support the action of the miners because they hope it might force the politicians to recognise their difficult position. Their radicalism is justified on the grounds of their dismal situation, but instead of a campaign for necessary change, it inspires their frustrated ploy to blow up the railway bridge. Encouraged by the laird, the Segget establishment, on the other hand, is determined to suppress the workers. The aim of their militancy is to maintain the status quo, which in the long run is no more constructive. A small group of outsiders consists of Chris, Colquhoun, Ake Ogilvie and the trade unionist Jock Cronin. They want to push through negotiations, but are punished for their effort. When the Strike collapses, it is thus Colquhoun and Cronin, not the bourgeoisie, that the spinners turn against:

The spinners and station folk wouldn't believe it when the news came through that the Strike was ended, they said the news was just a damned lie....Syne they heard how the leaders had been feared of the jail, and the whole thing just fell to smithereens in Segget. Some spinners that night went down the West Wynd and bashed in the windows of the Cronin

house, and set out in a birn to come to the Manse, they said the minister had egged them on, him safe and sound in his own damned job, and they'd do to the Manse as they'd done to the Cronins. (Gibbon 1933/1995a: 155)

Once again, the misunderstanding is due to a communication error between the minister, the spinners and Segget as a whole. Colquhoun may hold the right ideas for Segget, and Scotland, in other words, but again and again he proves incapable of turning his words into action.

As an example of Scottish Renaissance writing, *Cloud Howe* offers Gibbon's most accurate commentary on the state of the nation and its leaders. I previously attempted to place the work in relation to the "Condition of Scotland" genre, and in conclusion I want to return to that theme. As an image of Scotland, Segget works better than the alternatives of country and city, for, although it represents a transitory stage in the process that is moving the Scots from rural Kinraddie to urban Duncairn, it accommodates more aspects of Scottish life than any other space in the trilogy. The farm of Meiklebogs coexists with the railway and the mill; the old aristocracy confronts a rising proletariat; the ideas discussed range from the old-fashioned outlook of the Segget conservatives to relatively recent beliefs such as Colquhoun's socialism and Mowat's fascism. In consequence, Segget contains the old Scotland as well as the symptoms of a new, which makes it possible to read it as a Scotland in microcosm. If on a symbolic level, Segget speaks for the nation, it is a Scotland that is in a very bad way. Politically, the town suffers from the polarisation, which in the 1930s would drive the proletariat towards communism, the middle-class to the extreme right. Economically, the mill closure is symptomatic of the general depression that since the early 1920s had caused a decline in production, a rise in unemployment and a loss of faith in the capacity of Scottish industry. As regards the social situation, a comparison between Gibbon's narrative and Edwin Muir's *Scottish Journey*, which in a sense provides the factual companion to *Cloud Howe*'s fiction, underlines that poverty, malnutrition and ill health were the reality of inter-war Scotland. In places, Gibbon seems almost hysterical in his emphasis on the plights of the workers, but Muir's account of Glasgow is equally bleak. Hence there might have been a factual basis for Gibbon's fiction, which would justify his condemnation of Segget as the town should have acted upon the economic and social deterioration. Because of the community's failure to respond, conditions degenerate to such a degree that only a revolution might resolve the situation at the end. In his last



sermon, the minister calls for “*a stark, sure creed that will cut like a knife, a surgeon’s knife through the doubt and disease*”, which points to the communism of *Grey Granite* (Gibbon 1933/1995a: 210).

Even if Colquhoun’s final words anticipate the ideological concerns of *Grey Granite*, *Cloud Howe* is about the failure of Gibbon’s contemporaries to find a solution for Scotland, not the author’s vision of a new. Parallel to the decline of Segget, the narrative dramatises the fall of the minister, who, as a would-be reformer, represents one of Scotland’s flawed leaders. Immediately upon his arrival in Segget, Colquhoun recognises the need for reform if the town is to survive. He appeals to spinners and burghers alike in an attempt to make them co-operate, but he cannot overcome the communication barriers within his parish, which suggests that his ideas are inadequate. Though essentially a sympathetic character, he becomes increasingly frustrated by the way his idealism is discarded by an insensitive congregation. Slowly, his physical and mental health declines until he is defeated by the failure of the General Strike. At that climatic moment, Colquhoun learns about the plights of the aptly-named Kindness family in what reads as the most sentimental episode in the trilogy. The Kindnesses have been evicted from their home as a direct result of the economic crisis. As they have no one to turn to, they spend the night in an abandoned pig-sty where their baby is attacked by rats. When he hears about their fate, the minister invites the family to stay at the Manse until they have found a home elsewhere. Ironically, the legacy of that visit is the anger that provokes Colquhoun’s final judgement on Segget, as well as the disease that brings him down:

The Kindnesses had gone to friends in Dundon, and left no relic but a snow-happed grave, and this cough that Robert had got in his throat, and that memory that woke you, sick in the night, of the rats that fed on a baby’s flesh. And men had believed in a God and a Christ, men had believed in the kindness of men, men had believed that this order endured because of its truth and its justice to men. (Gibbon 1933/1995a: 204)

In addition to Colquhoun, whose Christian socialism is the most carefully imagined vision for Scotland, the other candidates for leadership are the mill-owning laird Mowat and Jock Cronin of the Labour movement. Throughout the novel, Mowat is presented as an unsympathetic character, whose fascist views offer no hope for the nation. “Discipline, order, hierarchy”, he declares after his homecoming, but it is his mismanagement of the mill that brings the community to its ruin (Gibbon 1933/1995a:

107). The portrait of Cronin is more ambivalent: as a trade-unionist, he is associated with left-wing policies that are preferable to Mowat's ideas. Yet he speaks for Labour, which according to the novelist, had compromised their radicalism in exchange for political gain in the 1926 General Strike. "The Labour Movement may win again to shadowy triumphs", Gibbon writes in his *Scottish Scene* portrait of Ramsay MacDonald: "but the spirit, the faith and the hope have gone from it" (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 107-8).

The conclusion to *Cloud Howe* offers little hope for the divided world of Segget. The death of the minister has deprived the community of its spiritual leader, whereas the closure of the mill undermines the economic basis of the community. Meanwhile, an alternative vision for Scotland has not emerged, which is to say that the reader is left in an ideological vacuum. In the concluding paragraph, Chris looks down upon the town of Segget:

Then that had finished; she went slow down the brae, only once looked back at the frown of the hills, and caught her breath at that sight they held, seeing them bare of their clouds for once, the pillars of mist that aye crowned their heights, all but a faint wisp vanishing south, and the bare, still rocks upturned to the sky. (Gibbon 1933/1995a: 212)

In comparison with the epilude of *Sunset Song*, the tone is strangely passive. On a personal level, that may be explained with reference to Chris's defiance of all ideological commitments. Within the context of the present discussion, however, such passivity underlines the inadequacy of Segget to provide the basis for a new vision. In consequence, Gibbon has to abandon old Scotland altogether in order to approach a myth of national regeneration.

### ***Grey Granite: Where tradition and modernity meet***

After the publication of *Cloud Howe* in 1933, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's views on Scottish culture and politics became increasingly pronounced. His frequent reviews of Scottish fiction in the left-wing periodical *The Free Man* enabled him to express his opinions on fellow-writers such as Gunn and James Barke, whereas his role as editor of the *Voice of Scotland* books gave him a say over who and what was included in that seminal series. The clearest indication of his beliefs emerges from *Scottish Scene*, however, which in addition to a number of short-stories contained essays by Gibbon on history, the land, Glasgow, Aberdeen, religion, literature and the "Wrecker", James Ramsay MacDonald.



Notorious among these is the following extract from “Glasgow”, where the author stresses the insignificance of art in comparison with urban destitution:

There is nothing in culture or art that is worth the life and elementary happiness of one of those thousands who rot in the Glasgow slums. There is nothing in science or religion. If it came (as it may come) to some fantastic choice between a free and independent Scotland, a centre of culture, a bright flame of artistic and scientific achievement, and providing elementary decencies of food and shelter to the submerged proletariat of Glasgow and Scotland, I at least would have no doubt as to which side of the battle I would range myself. For the cleansing of that horror, if cleanse it they could, I would welcome the English in suzerainty over Scotland till the end of time (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 140-41)

In a 1946 article on Gibbon, Hugh MacDiarmid characterised this declaration as a “purple passage of emotional humanism – the very antithesis of the way in which these evils can ever be overcome” (MacDiarmid 1946/1968b: 161). MacDiarmid’s dismissal is probably to be expected. Not only did Gibbon challenge the relevance of the arts to a depression-ridden nation, which to the poet was never in doubt, but “Glasgow” questioned the worth of Scotland itself and thus the nationalist philosophy of MacDiarmid. It was Neil Gunn, who raised the most serious objection to the Mearns writer’s thinking, however. Gibbon had insufficient faith in Scotland, Gunn observed in the 1938 piece “Tradition and Magic in the Work of Lewis Grassie Gibbon”, then continued: “If a Scot is going to help the world towards Socialism, then the place for him is Glasgow or Dundee; if towards Cosmopolism, then still Glasgow or Dundee; if towards some still finer conception, yet again his native heath” (Gunn 1938/1987a: 102). In short, the problem with Gibbon’s politics was his insistence on an internationalist solution where most of his Renaissance associates thought it necessary to begin closer to home.

If in an ideological sense, his communism made him unable to see beyond internationalism, Gibbon was equally uncompromising in his argument for linguistic nationalism. In “Literary Lights” he wrote:

To be oneself a provincial or an alien and to write a book in which the characters infect one’s literary medium with a tincture of dialect is not to assist in the creation or continuation of a separate national literature – else Eden Philpotts proves the great, un-English soul of Dartmoor and Tennyson in *The Northern Farmer* was advocating Home Rule for Yorkshire. The chief Literary Lights which modern Scotland claims to light up the scene of her night are in reality no more than the

commendable writers of the interesting English county of Scotshire.  
(Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 199)

This controversial definition of Scottish literature invites several objections. First of all, the author ignores the linguistic pluralism that had characterised the Scottish tradition throughout its history. Scots had always employed the alternative media of Scots, English and Gaelic, yet, like the contemporary criticism of Muir and MacDiarmid, "Literary Lights" suggests that was to change in the 1930s. At the same time, Gibbon's practice compromises his theory. In *Sunset Song* he had described his narrative style as a blend of Doric and English, whereas *Gay Hunter*, which appeared after *Scottish Scene*, was composed entirely in English. A final issue refers back to the general problem of nationalism. In "Glasgow" the writer had claimed that the preservation of Scottish literature and language was not worth the suffering of a single Glasgow worker, and in the light of that, it is strange that Scots has become all-important in "Literary Lights". There is a growing divide between political internationalism and creative nationalism within the novelist's vision, in other words, which implies an element of ideological confusion.

In spite of the contrary signals sent out by *Scottish Scene*, there is little doubt as to where the novelist was heading with *A Scots Quair*. I previously quoted the 1933 letter to Barke, in which Gibbon claims that the first volumes were to prepare the ground for communism (p.137), and this is substantiated by *Spartacus*, which came out between *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite*. As an anticipation of *Grey Granite*, the historical fiction of *Spartacus* is important for its portrayal of the slave leader as well as for its emphasis on a lack of compromise. With reference to the first, there are significant differences between the character of *Cloud Howe*'s flawed leader Robert Colquhoun and *Spartacus*. The minister's ideas for Segget were just, but he failed to enter into a constructive dialogue with the factions within his community; which is to say that he did not provide a foundation that was solid enough to support a new order. *Spartacus*, in contrast, is a man of the people. "Here the cry of horror merges with the agony of love, as *Spartacus becomes the slave-horde*", Douglas Gifford observes in *Gunn and Gibbon* in order to conclude that the slave general belongs in the same category as fellow-martyr Christ (Gifford 1983: 68-9). One cannot affect change from the detached position of the pulpit, Gibbon seems to suggest, and Colquhoun therefore has to make way for a more popular leader. In terms of strategy, *Spartacus* establishes the need for revolution rather



than reform. In *Cloud Howe* the disastrous break-down of the General Strike had shown the consequences when the Labour movement traded off its radicalism for political gain. On a similar note, Spartacus hesitates when confronted with the splendour of Rome, which, indirectly, leads to the withdrawal, defeat and crucifixion of the slaves. Accordingly, there are two lessons to be learned for the leader of Gibbon's new Scotland. He would have to be popular because that is the only way to overcome the communication gap that brought down Robert Colquhoun. In addition, he must be ruthless for his opposition would be merciless. To borrow MacDiarmid's expression, there was no room for "emotional humanitarianism" as Gibbon turned to *Grey Granite* in an attempt to produce a vision that was at once contemporary, regenerative and communist.

As the conclusion to the author's fictional history of Scotland, *Grey Granite* works on several levels. In terms of space, the city of Duncairn marks the end of the process of urbanisation that had brought the majority of Scots into an industrial environment. Chronologically, the narrative picks up at the point in the late 1920s, where *Cloud Howe* ended, and follows the story of modern Scotland through to the novelist's own present. As regards style, Gibbon recognised that *Grey Granite* represented his greatest challenge so far. In "Literary Lights" he writes:

[Gibbon's] scene so far has been a comparatively uncrowded and simple one – the countryside and village of modern Scotland. Whether his technique is adequate to compass and express the life of an industrialized Scots town in all its complexity is yet to be demonstrated; whether his peculiar style may not become either intolerably mannered or degenerate, in the fashion of Joyce, into the unfortunate unintelligibilities of a literary second childhood, is also in question. (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 205)

The reference to Joyce is interesting, for, according to Emer Nolan's *James Joyce and Nationalism*, the Irish modernist had allowed his Dublin to "define" itself through gossip, slang and story-telling (Nolan 1995: 87). Gibbon had used similar devices in the initial parts of his Scots trilogy where the communal voice of *Sunset Song* and the comic interludes of *Cloud Howe* evoked the nature of Kinraddie and Segget. As I discussed above (p. 139), the narrative voices became increasingly competitive and individualised in *Cloud Howe*, however, which implies that the homogeneity of the old Scotland was breaking down. That trend continues in *Grey Granite* where the story dissolves into paragraphs told from the contrasting perspectives of the press, police, provost, workers, Ma Cleghorn and Ewan, among others. Such fragmentation has two implications for our

reading of Duncairn. On one level, the disintegration of narrative structure reflects a society where communication across political, social and economic boundaries is no longer possible, and that theme picks up from *Cloud Howe* where Gibbon had used similar means to convey the disunity of Segget. A second and more wide-ranging interpretation reads the dissolution of narrative as a representation of the impact of modernisation. With modernity comes a growing individualism, which again means an emphasis on the single human being rather than a collective vision of society. As in the initial parts of *A Scots Quair*, Lewis Grassie Gibbon enlists narrative devices in order to communicate the nature of Duncairn, which makes the stylistic achievement in *Grey Granite* rival that of his earlier work.

With regard to the "Condition of Scotland" theme, the concluding part of Gibbon's trilogy reads less convincingly. A key element of the Renaissance literature, Edmund Stegmaier noted in the passage from "'Facts' and 'Vision' in Scottish Writing of the 1920s and 1930s" which I quoted in part one (p. 36), was the visionary aspect that enabled George Malcolm Thomson to turn his depressing account of contemporary Scotland in *Scotland That Distressed Area* into an emphatic statement of faith in the Scottish nation. A similar conclusion might be expected from a writer, who in *Cloud Howe* had provided a survey of the political, economic and social situation in Scotland. If there is hope at the end of *A Scots Quair*, however, it is an optimism unconnected with Scotland. Such absence of a national idea of regeneration may be interpreted in the light of the conflict between political internationalism and creative nationalism which had inspired the inconsistencies of Gibbon's essays in *Scottish Scene*. In *Lewis Grassie Gibbon*, Ian Campbell observes with special reference to the language issue:

Lewis Grassie Gibbon is here writing on the edges of a large and important controversy. On the one hand, he sees the past of his country as a long-continued dilution and diminution of distinctive and worthy characteristics, and the importance of struggle by the surviving Scots to define a Scottishness worthy of the new era. On the other hand, Gibbon firmly rejects the nationalism of his day and views Synthetic Scots with only cautious approval. (Campbell 1985: 51)

If applied to *A Scots Quair*, Campbell's contraposition of the novelist's culture and politics allows the reader to marginalise the ideological dimension that makes Gibbon so hard to accommodate within a Renaissance ethos. After all, it is the last survivor of the old Scotland, Chris, not her communist son Ewan, who brings the narrative to its close, which could suggest that the author's Scottishness finally triumphs over his



ideology. Such a reading is difficult to sustain with reference to the main development in *Grey Granite*, however, for, in contrast to *Sunset Song* and *Cloud Howe*, which celebrated Scottish manners, Scotland disappears in the modern world of Duncairn. The identity of the individual city-dweller is no longer based on the location they have come from, but on their place within the economic hierarchy. Their speech is determined by social factors where in Kinraddie it had been regional. Their culture depends on mass consumption, which is to say that Woolworth's, movies and music-hall entertainment have taken over from the ceilidhs of the old Scotland. Ewan thrives within such an environment, which is not surprising, given that Gibbon had already underlined his distance from the Scottish world of Segget through the use of Standard English for Ewan in *Cloud Howe* (Gibbon 1933/1995a: 196-7). Chris, on the contrary, cannot relate to a society uprooted from its Scottish background. When in "Sphene" Ma Cleghorn treats her to an American movie, she therefore finds Chris somewhat unconvinced:

Chris felt sleepy almost as soon as she sat, and yawned, pictures wearied her nearly to death, the flickering shadows and the awful voices, the daft tales they told and the dafter news. She fell asleep through the cantrips a creature was playing, a mouse dressed up in breeks like a man, and only woke up as Ma shook her: *Hey, the meikle film's starting now, lassie, God damn't, d'you want to waste a whole ninepeeny ticket?* (Gibbon 1934/1995a: 85)

Whether Chris appreciates it or not, the world of Mickey Mouse, mass culture and industrialism represents the future of Scotland within the trilogy as *Grey Granite* is primarily concerned with the ideological maturation of Ewan, not her struggle to maintain a sense of Scottishness in a world that is becoming increasingly denationalised. Accordingly, Scotland is being confined to the past societies of Echt, Kinraddie and Segget as *A Scots Quair* moves towards its climax. The ideological implication of that is interesting. Whereas the ideals of contemporaries George Malcolm Thomson, Eric Linklater and Neil Gunn were based on a return to Scottish values, Gibbon discards Scotland as an idea valuable to a contemporary audience, which again proves that he founded his regenerative vision on communism where his fellow-writers relied on nationalism.

The suppression of the Scottish element in *Grey Granite* means that the success of the fiction as a myth of revival depends on the strengths of Ewan as protagonist and carrier of the novel's political message. As a character, he appears to get it right where former reformers had failed. Unlike Robert Colquhoun, who had tried to change

Segget from the detached position of the pulpit, Ewan chooses to become a worker himself in order to overcome his rural background and enter the mind of the proletariat. He is one of the masses, not above them, it would seem, in the manner of Spartacus. Yet Ewan is intended as a stronger figure than the slave general, who had hesitated when confronted with the might of Rome. In "Zircon" Gibbon hints at Ewan's involvement with vandalism against Gowan and Gloag's, which would prove his willingness to exploit any means in order to achieve his goals (Gibbon 1934/1995a: 187). That impression is confirmed by his behaviour towards his girlfriend Ellen, when she is pressurised by her employers into abandoning her radical politics. "*Go to them then in your comfortable car – your Labour Party and your comfortable flat*", Ewan tells the woman who had first brought his attention to the need for change, and continues: "*But what are you doing out here with me? I can get a prostitute anywhere*" (Gibbon 1934/1995a: 195). Ewan's unsympathetic response when Ellen asks him to make an emotional rather than an intellectual commitment, is not necessarily incompatible with the novelist's politics, although it undermines the effectiveness of his vision. In consequence, *Grey Granite*, which should have brought to life a Scotland that was urban, industrial and radical, as opposed to an order that had been rural, agricultural and conservative, fails to convince because the reader cannot identify with the protagonist. Gibbon's ideological message is further weakened by a conclusion that returns Chris to the old Scotland of Echt rather than dramatising the emergence of a new. In *A Blasphemer and Reformer*, William Malcolm reads the end as follows:

Chris's experience is thus of paramount importance in *A Scots Quair*, for through his heroine [Gibbon] presents the "third way to Life", redefining the religious experience in a universe devoid of spiritual meaning, and providing an empirically valid conception of God. Where Ewan ends trying to conquer the future, Chris finally triumphs over all the forces of time. (Malcolm 1984: 184)

I remain unconvinced by Malcolm's argument, which puts forward the nihilism of Chris as an alternative to communism. Admittedly, the final pages of the trilogy are difficult to accommodate within a communist framework, but I would ascribe that to the weaknesses of Ewan's character rather than the strong presence of Chris. As a result, *Grey Granite* completes the death of Scotland as it had been imagined in *Sunset Song* and *Cloud Howe*, where it should have marked the beginning of a new era.



In different ways, Gibbon's last three novels all point to a flawed idealism. *Spartacus* is concerned with a historical event, which is to say that its development was predetermined by facts. Inevitably, the fiction would end in the suppression of the slave revolt, which proved that even the joint efforts of the world's underdogs, represented by a Spartacist army that included representatives from all the oppressed peoples of the ancient world, were inadequate against the power of Rome. In comparison with the novels that followed, *Spartacus* contains a visionary dimension, which suggests that the descendants of the slaves might succeed where their fathers had failed. In the final revelation of Kleon, the Greek eunuch who had acted as advisor to the slave general, the figures of Spartacus and Christ merge into one (Gibbon 1933/1990: 210). According to William Malcolm's *A Blasphemer and Reformer*, that identifies the slave as the first in a succession of working-class heroes that in Scottish history will count William Wallace, the Covenanters and Ewan (Malcolm 1984: 16-7). After the defeat of the slaves in *Spartacus*, Gibbon seems to have wanted to use *Grey Granite* to put history right, but, as it turned out, the third part of *A Scots Quair* did not accomplish that feat. I previously discussed the weaknesses of Ewan as a character which, indirectly, undercut the author's ideological message. Equally important is the question of realism, which might have prevented the artist from an overtly idealist conclusion in the manner of Neil Gunn's *The Drinking Well*. Hitherto Gibbon's Scottish fiction had presented an account of the past that was plausible to a contemporary audience because it had been based on facts. With *Grey Granite*, the writer reached the hunger marches of the early 1930s, beyond which he could not go without abandoning his realistic approach. Whether or not he would have wished to end with such an event, a communist revolution had not occurred in Scotland at his time of writing, and any attempt to fictionalise such an incident would remove his narrative from the mode of realism into that of romance. Rather than risking that, which would call into question the validity of the whole trilogy as fictional history, he finishes with the departure of Ewan for London, which, in a figurative sense, weakens his ideological message.

Whereas history and realism forced Gibbon to compromise his idealism in *Spartacus* and *Grey Granite*, the science-fiction of *Gay Hunter* appears to offer more scope for the author to pursue his personal ideals. The narrative focuses on the American anthropologist Gay, who travels to a distant future in the company of the fascist villains Major Houghton and Lady Jane. Gay joins a band of hunters, whom she assists in the

battle against the fascists' ploys. After the final destruction of evil, she prepares to settle in an egalitarian and co-operative society that she recognises as superior to her twentieth-century civilisation, only to awaken in her own time:

Where were the hunters now? Now? This was the now! The folk – Rem – Wolf – the Chiltern Dam – the Forest of Dreadful Night, the London of the Hierarchs – they were fading like a dream though she dropped her cigarette and dropped on her knees in a passion of desolation and reached after them, sobbing. . . . and all around, impossible as them, a twentieth-century morning was breaking. (Gibbon 1934/1989: 183)

Gibbon's grand vision of a future Golden Age ends with a nice cup of coffee and a cigarette, which is strangely appropriate after the flawed idealism of *Spartacus* and *Grey Granite*. In contrast to Hugh MacDiarmid and Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon seems to have found no idea strong enough to sustain him, and he consequently left the questions he had asked unresolved.

### Lewis Grassie Gibbon in the Scottish Renaissance

In a manner uncharacteristic of the mid-1930s, when the first divisions had already emerged within the cultural and political wings of the Scottish movement, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's death in February, 1935, united the factions temporarily. In his biography, Ian Munro mentions among those who offered Ray Mitchell their assistance James Barke, Helen B. Cruickshank, Compton Mackenzie, Eric Linklater and Hugh MacDiarmid, which is to say that the event brought together Renaissance writers from across the political spectrum (Munro 1966: 209). "Of all our writers he is just the man we could least afford to lose", Neil Gunn wrote in a condolence letter to Ray Mitchell, and similar concerns were expressed by MacDiarmid and Mackenzie (as quoted in Munro 1966: 208). In his commemoration of Gibbon from *The Scottish Standard*, March 1935, Edwin Muir summed up the views of his fellow-writers in the following words:

Leslie Mitchell was only thirty-three when he died. For a man of that age his achievement was truly remarkable; but nobody who knew him doubted that it would have been far surpassed by what he had it in him still to do. His mind was so adventurous and so unpredictable that it would have been bound to surprise even those who thought that they were familiar with it; and his energy was such that one could not imagine even old age exhausting its infinite variety. He had fought with hardship most of his life; and it seemed to everybody that he had almost reached a position where he could at last sit down and produce the work that was in



him when death came. What his loss is to Scottish literature is past computation. (Muir 1935a: 23-24)

Whether or not he had reached his artistic heights, Gibbon's untimely death leaves the reader with a number of unresolved issues. In relation to Scotland, it never becomes clear whether he managed to resolve the conflict between nationalism and internationalism that is evident in *Scottish Scene*, for example. In *The Company I've Kept* MacDiarmid argued for a last-minute conversion to the Scottish cause, but there is no evidence to support his claim (MacDiarmid 1966: 224). Similarly, little suggests in what direction Gibbon was heading in an ideological sense. His last novels had ended in flawed idealism rather than an emerging new order, which might have encouraged him either to withdraw from politics altogether or seek an alternative ideal that was easier to sustain. As it comes across in his writings, the vision of Gibbon appears incomplete in a way that the thinking of Muir, MacDiarmid and Gunn is not.

In spite of such paradoxes, Lewis Grassie Gibbon undoubtedly made a major contribution to the inter-war revaluation of Scotland. The geography of *Sunset Song* represents a departure from the nineteenth-century image in the sense that it replaced the myth of Kailyard timelessness with a contemporary Scotland that was both realistic and dynamic. The effects of such verisimilitude were intensified by linguistic means. Where Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson had confined Scots to the speech of comical and lower-class figures, Gibbon reclaimed the vernacular as a medium for fiction. Like MacDiarmid in his lyrics, the Mearns writer would use a diction that at once expressed his Scottishness and a modernist concern with language, and, arguably, his accomplishment rivalled the poet's. As fictional history, *A Scots Quair* dramatises the relatively recent process of modernisation where nineteenth-century historians had traditionally preferred romantic icons such as Robert the Bruce, Mary Queen of Scots and Bonnie Prince Charlie. Gibbon's essay "The Antique Scene" focused on those that had suffered from a successive series of disasters such as the invasion of Edward I, the Reformation controversies and the Covenanting wars, and the fiction confirmed that these commoners were the only Scots that mattered. In a manner characteristic of Scottish writing in the 1930s, the author used his work to show how Scotland had been misrepresented by the false images of the past, whilst creating through fiction a Scotland that was more to his liking. Against such thematic concerns should be placed his attacks

on the nationalism associated with the Renaissance. In "Glasgow" he reflects on the sacrifices the nation might face in order to satisfy the nationalists:

Note what the Scot is bidden to give up: the English language, that lovely and flexible instrument, so akin to the darker Braid Scots which has been the Scotsman's tool of thought for a thousand years. English methods of education: which are derived from Germano-French-Italian models. English fashions in dress: invented in Paris-London-Edinburgh-Timbuktu-Calcutta-Chichen-Itza-New York. English models in the arts: nude models as well, no doubt – Scots models in future must sprout three pairs of arms and a navel in the likeness of a lion rampant. English ideals: decency, freedom, justice, ideals innate in the mind of man, as common to the Bantu as to the Kentishman – those also he must relinquish. . . . (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 145-46)

Though the ironic tone of the passage calls into question the seriousness of his argument, Gibbon's complaint underlines his inability to accept the compatibility of nationalism and internationalism. Like the Muir of *Scottish Journey*, he sees the two ideologies as mutually exclusive in a way they never were to Gunn and MacDiarmid. Hence it may have been the fear that he might compromise his radicalism that inspired the novelist to speak out against the nationalism of the Scottish Renaissance, when in his fiction he expressed similar ideas.

In general, ideological matters present the most obvious obstacle to a reading of Lewis Grassie Gibbon within the context of the Scottish revival. "I am a revolutionary writer", he declared in *The Left Review* in 1935, only to distance himself from fellow-writers who assumed that the Depression would result in a collapse of capitalist literature (Gibbon 1935: 179). Gibbon concluded: "I hate capitalism; all my books are explicit or implicit propaganda. But because I'm a revolutionist I see no reason for gainsaying my own critical judgement" (Gibbon 1935: 180). This is important for two reasons. On the one hand, it puts his communism beyond doubt, which is significant in the light of late novels such as *Spartacus* and *Grey Granite*, which are clearly motivated by his politics. That undermines MacDiarmid's argument for Gibbon as a last-minute convert to nationalism, or indeed any reading of the novelist within a nationalist framework. The author's insistence on "not gainsaying my own critical judgement", on the other hand, might account for some of his inconsistencies. *Grey Granite*'s flawed idealism, for instance, is hard to relate to "Glasgow" which culminates in a vision of a Cosmopolitan ideal. Where the essay is propaganda, however, which allows for a declamatory tone, the fiction concludes a trilogy that had insisted on realism throughout.



For the same reasons that he had refused to proclaim the collapse of capitalist literature because he knew it to be untrue, he could not finish with a revolution that had yet to occur. In the end, his realism triumphed over romance in a manner that calls into question his thinking as a whole.

The novelist's scope raises other problems, for, like Neil Gunn, whose Scottish landscape was composed of Caithness and Sutherland primarily, Gibbon's Scotland derives from a limited geographical base. To his credit, the writer's "Howe of the World" contains rural Kinraddie, small-town Segget and industrial Duncairn, which is to say that he appears more comfortable with an urban setting than Gunn, who in novels such as *Wild Geese Overhead* had marginalised Glasgow. Yet Gibbon's Scottish experience is essentially Lowland, rural and peasant as he demonstrates in "The Land":

I like to remember I am of peasant rearing and peasant stock. Good manners prevail on me not to insist on the fact over-much, not to boast in the company of those who come from manes and slums and castles and villas, the folk of the proletariat, the bigger and lesser bourgeoisies. But I am again and again, as I hear them talk of their origins and beginnings and begetters, conscious of an overweening pride that mine was thus and so, that the land was so closely and intimately mine (...) that I feel of a strange and antique age in the company and converse of my adult peers – like an adult himself listening to the bright sayings and laughs of callow boys, parvenus on the human scene, while I, a good Venriconian Pict, harken from the shade of my sun circle and look away, bored, in pride of possession at my terraced crops, at the on-coming of rain and snow across my leavened fields. . . . (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 293-94)

While his emphasis on his Pictish roots provides an antidote to the Celticism that characterises much Renaissance writing, Gibbon's sense of peasant superiority reads uncomfortably because it excludes from his Scotland the alternative stories of the Highlands, the Central Belt and the middle class.

While his geographical and ideological limitations might be explained with reference to writers such as Gunn and Muir, who show similar traits, Lewis Grassie Gibbon's attitude to Scotland is less easily ignored. For, in spite of the power the Mearns undoubtedly held over his imagination, he never envisioned Scotland as anything but a world that had passed. In *Sunset Song*, Scottishness was presented as an aspect of the order that had ended when Robert Colquhoun proclaimed the death of the peasantry. In *Cloud Howe*, the author stressed how contemporary Scotland had failed to enact the reconstruction necessary to solve a dismal situation, which underlines his lack of belief in the ability of the nation to affect the necessary change. In *Grey Granite*, the Scottish

dimension disappeared altogether, which is to say that it was associated with the societies of the past, not the modern world of Duncairn. The “death of Scotland” theme recurs in *Scottish Scene*: towards the end of my section on *Sunset Song*, I quoted from “The Land” an extract which dismisses the notion of a return to the land (p. 135). That life is not for modern Scots, Gibbon emphasises, which suggests that Scottish regeneration must be urban based. Prior to that, he implied in the opening of “The Land” that the only truly Scottish experience was that of the North East peasantry, which seems to confine his notion of Scotland and Scottishness to a particular historical era with no bearing on twentieth-century reality. As a result, the Scottish nation comes across as history in the work of Lewis Grassie Gibbon, where to other writers of the Scottish Renaissance it would carry the hopes for a future.



## Where things miscarry: Edwin Muir 1918-43

In his scepticism with regard to Scottish nationalism, the writer closest to Lewis Grassie Gibbon is the Orcadian poet and critic Edwin Muir. Because of his insistence on Scots as the only acceptable medium for Scottish Renaissance literature, Gibbon tends to be compared to Hugh MacDiarmid, who shared his enthusiasm for the vernacular, rather than Muir, who did not. Yet Muir and Gibbon met in their attitude to Scotland and the Scots, which inspired them to speak out against the separatism of their peers.

Nationalism was inadequate, Gibbon and Muir stressed in such polemics as *Scottish Scene* and *Scottish Journey*, for it could not resolve the crisis of Scotland in the 1930s. As an alternative, they put forward the internationalist models of communism and socialism, for they perceived economic and social reconstruction to be a more urgent concern than constitutional issues. The basis of their agreement may have been similar readings of history, for, as Edwin Muir observes in "Lewis Grassie Gibbon", Gibbon's Diffusionist stance appealed strongly to him in the early 1930s:

[Gibbon] believed, with Professor Elliot Smith, that the legend of a golden age preceding the recorded history of mankind was founded on truth; that man was inherently good; and that his vices were caused by faults implicit in the succession of civilisations which rose from the cradle of them all, that is, ancient Egypt. This was a theory which appealed very strongly to me, as helping to explain the dream of an Eden which mankind has nursed so stubbornly through the darkest ages, and to justify the hope of a better future age which has inspired so many movements, both religious and secular, up to modern Socialism. (Muir 1935a: 23)

Although the novelist might sympathise with the idea of Eden as a foundation for an improved society, this account of Diffusionism is closer connected with Muir's personal philosophy than with the vision of Gibbon, who in *Sunset Song* had opted for a realistic approach. Unlike Gibbon, who accepted evolution as a gradual process of change, Muir envisioned the past in terms of absolute discontinuity in the 1930s. Against the primordial state of innocence, he would place the chaos emerging from the loss of such order, and although his concepts of Eden and Fall resemble the Diffusionist notion of a golden age destroyed by civilisation, they are religious in their connotations. Hence Muir uses Gibbon's theory to substantiate his own beliefs in a manner that Allie Hixson's *Edwin Muir* sees as characteristic of his method in general: "Edwin Muir worked his way doggedly and integrally to a conclusion, which meant a parting of the

ways with close associates – whether Socialists, Nietzscheans, Guildsmen, or ‘Lallans’ poets – if they impeded his unique development” (Hixson 1977: 103).

At the heart of Muir’s vision lies the question of continuity. In “Lewis Grassie Gibbon”, he underlined the absolute divide between the Golden Age and civilisation, and such recognition of the impossibility of a return to Eden from the present state of disruption pervades most of his inter-war writings. The basis for his thesis appears to have been personal experience. In *The Story and the Fable*, he reflects on his problematic transition between rural Orkney and industrial Glasgow:

I was born before the Industrial Revolution, and am now about two hundred years old. But I have skipped a hundred and fifty of them. I was really born in 1737, and till I was fourteen no time-accidents happened to me. Then in 1751 I set out from Orkney for Glasgow. When I arrived I found that it was not 1751, but 1901, and that a hundred and fifty years had been burned up in my two days’ journey. But I myself was still in 1751, and remained there for a long time. All my life since I have been trying to overhaul that invisible leeway. (Muir 1940: 263)

This passage is important for an understanding of Muir within the Scottish Renaissance for such a dramatic change of environment may have prevented him from developing a natural relationship with Scotland. Where in the works of Gunn and Gibbon, for example, the same Scottish landscape reveals both its positive and negative qualities, Muir’s inter-war vision of Scotland appears to split into the extremes of Orkney and Glasgow, a rural Eden versus the industrial Hell. In the opening chapter of *An Autobiography* the author recalls how he had suffered his first loss of innocence in Orkney, which shows that his experience of Scotland was not as black and white as it comes across in his creative writings of the 1920s and 1930s (Muir 1954/1993: 24-25). In such works as *The Three Brothers* (1931) and *Poor Tom* (1932), however, he relied on Orkney symbolism to conjure up a positive vision, whereas he used Glasgow to evoke the fall of mankind. To his personal experience of Orkney and Glasgow, Muir added an international dimension when in 1921 he left London for Prague. In relation to MacDiarmid’s Renaissance programme, this is significant as it constituted an attempt to reconnect Scottish tradition with the European mainstream. With regard to Muir’s own development, the writer’s first-hand knowledge of the languages and cultures of Middle Europe offered him a benchmark, against which he could measure the achievement of himself and the Scottish Renaissance. The European connection probably increased Muir’s detachment from Scotland in a geographic sense. Whilst residing in Europe and



England, he was thus physically removed from Scottish reality, and once he returned in the mid-1930s to confront a depressed nation, he seems to have been overwhelmed by what he saw. As a result, his early enthusiasm for the Scottish revival was turned into the disenchantment of *Scottish Journey* (1935) and *Scott and Scotland* (1936).

In spite of such ambiguities, Edwin Muir appears to have considered himself a Scottish poet when in 1923 he published “Ballad of the Monk”, “Ballad of the Flood” and “Ballad of the Black Douglas” in *The Scottish Chapbook*. These early poems were composed in the vernacular, but Muir’s accomplishment did not compare with MacDiarmid’s Scots lyrics, which is perhaps inevitable, given that the Orkney poet came from a part of Scotland that was not traditionally Scots-speaking. In *An Autobiography* Muir characterised his native idiom as “a mixture of Norse, Scots, and Irish”, and although such a background provided him with an awareness of the linguistic differences between English and Scots, it made him less competent in the vernacular than MacDiarmid and Gibbon, who grew up in Scots-speaking communities (Muir 1954/1993: 53). Muir had encountered the Scottish ballads at an early age, which is significant as he would draw on that knowledge throughout his career (Muir 1954/1993: 19-20). In 1923, he thus discussed the value of the ballads as a starting point for a revived Scottish poetry in the essay “A Note on the Scottish Ballads”. One of the strengths of this tradition, he noted, was its vernacular medium, which had enabled Scottish poets to address issues that were at once national and universal in orientation. “Since English became the literary language of Scotland”, he concluded in a passage reminiscent of MacDiarmid: “there has been no Scots imaginative writer who has attained greatness in the first or even the second rank through the medium of English” (Muir 1923/1982c: 155). When he was writing this, Muir was living in Europe, which must have limited the amount of information available to him on Scottish matters. Yet he is remarkably well informed as he demonstrates in a 1923 letter to his sister and brother-in-law where he sets out with a comment on the Scottish election results, makes a passing reference to *Scottish Nation*, then declares: “When I see things stirring up so much I would like to be back to take a hand in the work. We will certainly (D.V.) be back in Scotland to stay next summer” (Muir 1923/1974: 30).

The Muirs returned to Scotland in 1924 when the closure of A. S Neill’s school at Sonntagberg deprived them of their Austrian home and income. A combined longing for Scotland and the prospects of a national revival brought the couple to Willa’s native

Montrose, which, as the home of Hugh MacDiarmid, was the geographical heart of the Scottish Renaissance in the 1920s. MacDiarmid must have been excited by the possible inclusion of Muir in a team that already numbered Neil Gunn and F. G. Scott. In *Contemporary Scottish Studies* he paid tribute to Muir's talent by proclaiming him the only first rate critic to come out of Scotland, and Muir returned the compliment in his 1925 essay "The Scottish Renaissance" (MacDiarmid 1926/1995: 93; Muir 1925: 259). Their friendship did not prevent a disenchantment on Muir's behalf, who found his home country less receptive to art than MacDiarmid's propaganda might have led him to believe. With the exception of an occasional review and the republication of "A Note on the Scottish Ballads" in *Latitudes* (1924), little Scottish criticism came out of the Montrose spell, which suggests that the author was not prepared to commit himself fully to the Renaissance. In a 1927 letter, he sums up his views on the revival:

When we were in Scotland last time we heard a lot about Scottish Nationalism from C. M. Grieve (Hugh MacDiarmid) who wrote *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*. It seems a pity that Scotland should always be kept back by England, and I hope the Scottish Republic comes about: it would make Scotland worth living in. Grieve is a strong nationalist, republican, socialist, and everything that is out and out. He thinks that if Scotland were a nation we would have Scottish literature, art, music, culture and everything that other nations seem to have and we haven't. I think that would probably be likely; but I feel rather detached, as I've often told Grieve, because after all I'm not Scotch, I'm an Orkney man, a good Scandinavian, and my true country is Norway, or Denmark, or Iceland, or some place like that. (Muir 1927/1974: 64)

Muir's letter is significant on three accounts. First of all, it establishes a connection between the state of a nation and the development of its literature, which resembles MacDiarmid's argument of the 1920s. Secondly, the writer stresses his personal detachment from the Scottish scene as an Orcadian, who looks to Iceland or Scandinavia for his identity rather than to Scotland. A third piece of information is contained in the letter heading: Muir is in France, not Scotland, whilst writing so sympathetically about MacDiarmid's Renaissance; Muir is never in Scotland when seemingly enthusiastic about Scottish matters. His letters from Germany, Austria and France show his interest in developments in Scotland, but once he came back for shorter or longer spells, it often proved a disappointment.

Edwin Muir's concern with Scottish matters becomes more obvious towards the end of the twenties. Through letters he maintained contact with MacDiarmid, whereas his



move to Hampstead in 1932 brought him in touch with London Scots such as George Malcolm Thompson, the Carswells and Lewis Grassie Gibbon. Muir's reviews ensured a Scottish presence in the British press, while his European profile, which in the 1930s was strengthened by his translation activities and criticism, made him the ideal delegate when in the thirties Scottish P. E. N wanted to establish itself as an independent body at the international conferences in Budapest and Dubrovnik. Despite his interest in Scottish issues, Muir's criticism implies that he had yet to come to terms with Scotland. Although he repeatedly returned to the point that the decline of Scottish culture was related to the loss of nationhood, he was not prepared to argue the case for Scottish nationalism too strongly and pulled back if that was where his argument was taking him. Yes, he stressed in the 1931 essay "The Functionlessness of Scotland", a nationalist solution seemed the logical answer to Scotland's problems, but as a rule, he preferred the position of an outside spectator who did not dirty his hands in battle (Muir 1931/1982c: 107). He was equally cautious with regard to the vernacular. The 1923 "ballads" had demonstrated that Scots did not work as a medium for Muir's poetry, which might explain why he became so sceptical of its potential as a literary language. In "Literature in Scotland", a 1934 article for *The Spectator*, he observed:

Apart from "Hugh MacDiarmid", the names most commonly connected with the Scottish Renaissance are those of Neil M. Gunn, Eric Linklater and Lewis Grassie Gibbon. Mr. Gunn's sensitive style is more obviously influenced by D. H. Lawrence than by Neil Munro; Mr. Linklater writes vigorous Elizabethan prose; Mr. Gibbon has struck out a style which does succeed in giving the rhythm of the Scottish vernacular. But all use English as their natural utterance; their literary inspiration is the great English writers, not Dunbar or Burns. On the other hand, they write about Scottish life for a Scottish audience, and not for an English one, like Stevenson. They write for this audience in English, it is true, but there they have little choice; for the Scottish people are a people who talk in Scots but think in English. These writers are, in any case, more intimately Scottish than Stevenson was, and that justifies one in calling the literary revival to which they belong a Scottish one. (Muir 1934/1982c: 148-49)

"Literature in Scotland" anticipates the quarrel with Scotland that moved to the fore of Muir's Scottish writings in the mid-1930s. In her autobiography *Belonging*, Willa Muir ascribed such negativity to the couple's move to St. Andrews in 1935, which appears to have confirmed her husband's bad feelings for his country (W. Muir 1968: 194-95). I do not think the impact of the St. Andrews environment should be overestimated, however,

for the pessimistic ideas behind *Scott and Scotland* were by no means new to Muir. *Scott and Scotland*, which, as the author's contribution to the *Voice of Scotland* series, should be regarded as a Renaissance text, developed the conclusions of "Literature in Scotland" into the theory that an ambitious Scottish writer had no other language than English available, whereas the general thesis that Scottish tradition collapsed as a result of the Reformation was anticipated by *John Knox* (1929) and *Scottish Journey* (1935). Whether or not it was intended as such, *Scott and Scotland* became a break with Scotland. The critic never responded to the attacks by MacDiarmid that followed upon his controversial piece, and to a large degree, Scottish themes disappeared from his writings. By 1939, when the Second World War broke out, the situation in Scotland no longer seemed a primary concern for Muir, who was now moving towards the mature vision that in the 1940s and 1950s would enable him to resolve the polarities of his inter-war work.

I have divided my analysis of Edwin Muir's inter-war writings into three parts. My first section, "In an age of transition", discusses the poet's experience of English and European culture in the 1920s, and the manner in which this early criticism anticipates the thematic concerns of his Scottish works. My second part, "Edwin Muir's Scottish journey", covers the years 1929-1935, when he made his most important contribution to the Scottish revival. In their respective genres, *John Knox*, *The Three Brothers* and *Scottish Journey* engaged with the Renaissance project of historical revisionism, yet introduced a vision of Scotland that was unique to Muir. Finally, "To 'Scotland' and beyond" considers how the author's physical move to St. Andrews in 1935 became a spiritual move away from Scotland. In my discussion, I will concentrate on the inter-war prose because that is where Muir's struggle with Scotland is most evident. I am aware that such a focus may leave a slightly unbalanced picture. Where in the 1920s and 1930s, Muir's writings thus raise many of the paradoxes that are central to his growth, it is only in his post-1945 poetry that he resolves these issues, which places his positive vision outwith the chronological scope of the present analysis.

### **In an age of transition: The growth of a critic 1918-28**

In 1935, T. S. Eliot wrote in "Religion and Literature" on the absence of a philosophical frame-work for the contemporary artist:

In an age which accepts some precise Christian theology, the common code may be fairly orthodox: though even in such periods the common



code may exalt such concepts as "honour", "glory" or "revenge" to a position quite intolerable to Christianity. The dramatic ethics of the Elizabethan Age offers an interesting study. But when the common code is detached from its theological background, and is consequently more and more merely a matter of habit, it is exposed both to prejudice and to change. At such times morals are open to being altered *by* literature; so that we find in practice that what is "objectionable" in literature is merely what the present generation is not used to. (Eliot 1935/1975: 97)

Edwin Muir shared with Eliot the concern over a loss of standards in the arts as well as in society as such. Such decadence, he stressed in his first publication *We Moderns* (1918), was the result of the promotion of society over the individual, which had undermined the single human's control over his being: "It has been observed again and again that as societies – forms of production, of government, and so on – become more complex, the mastery of the individual over his destiny grows weaker" (Muir 1918: 22). Muir's words underline the impact of the 1914-18 war which had intervened on all levels of society. In his introduction to *A War Imagined* Samuel Hynes argues that the scale of destruction witnessed in the First World War had made it impossible for writers to imagine a return to the state preceding the war. As a result, British imagination split into pre-war and post-war – the dream of an idyllic, yet remote past where ancient values prevailed, versus the reality of Eliot's wasteland where nihilism and disorder rule (Hynes 1992: ix). On the consequences of that divorce, Muir observes in *Latitudes* (1924): "[This] means that we have lost living faith in ourselves and in our fate, and that we have lapsed back into what is established and finished for all time. We believe in our fathers, or perhaps in our grandfathers, but not in ourselves" (Muir 1924: 209). In response to the contemporary crisis of faith, Muir and Eliot reached out for an alternative order. As the above quotation implies, Eliot championed the idea of an underlying, Christian framework, and although Muir is hard to associate with any particular theological position apart from Calvinism, which he denounced fiercely throughout his life, an acceptance of some spiritual dimension is present in his work too. In an early essay on Robert Henryson, he thus celebrates an age when everything had been part of a higher, cosmological framework:

[Henryson] lived near the end of a great age of settlement, religious, intellectual and social; an agreement had been reached regarding the nature and meaning of human life, and the imagination could attain harmony and tranquillity. It was one of those ages when everything, in spite of the practical disorder of life, seems to have its place; the ranks and occupations of men; the hierarchy of animals; good and evil; the

earth, heaven and hell; and the life of man and of the beasts turns naturally into a story because it is part of a greater story about which there is general consent (Muir 1965: 10)

I want to stress the Eliot-Muir connection for two reasons. First of all, it indicates the extent to which both were expressing the spirit of their age. In her article "Tradition and the Individual Scot", Sheila Hearn compares Muir's *New Age* series "Our Generation" 1920-22 to Eliot's "Commentaries" of the late 1920s: "'Our Generation' and the 'Commentaries' show distinct similarities on so many levels – of content, style, form, attitude, publishing history – that they amount to an index of the atmosphere in which the most influential theories of modern literary tradition were formed" (Hearn 1983: 22). Hearn acknowledges an Arnoldian influence on the critics (Hearn 1983: 22). To that, I would add the possibility that Eliot and Muir adopted the approach that was most fashionable at their time of writing, which accounts for at least some of the parallels. Secondly, and more significantly with reference to my argument, is the Orkney writer's development of Eliot's theories. The obvious example is the correspondence between Muir's "dissociation of Scottish sensibility" in *Scott and Scotland* and the fragmentation Eliot identifies within British literary tradition in the 1921 essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (Eliot 1921/1975: 64-65). Other influential ideas are Eliot's concern with tradition in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) as well as the figure of Milton, who in Eliot's criticism plays a role not unlike that of Muir's Knox, and they indicate to what an extent Muir had already made up his mind on a number of key issues when he turned to Scotland in the late 1920s.

Edwin Muir's connection with A. R. Orage's *The New Age* meant that he started out as a commentator on British affairs rather than a Scottish critic in the manner of MacDiarmid. Between 1916 and 1918, he contributed a number of epigrams under the heading "We Moderns" to Orage's journal, and they were collected in *We Moderns* in 1918. In 1919 Willa and Edwin Muir decided to leave Glasgow for London. Initially, the change of environment proved problematic to the author, who found his lack of formal education prevented him from getting suitable employment, while his mental health suffered as a result of the unfamiliar surroundings. Eventually Muir's contact with *The New Age* secured him the position as Orage's assistant editor, and over the next couple of years that is where he learnt his trade. A symptom of his growth is the "Our Generation" series which consisted of a weekly comment on social, economic and



cultural matters. With the exception of Ritchie Robertson's "'Our Generation': Edwin Muir as social critic, 1920-22", critics have left this part of Muir's writings unnoticed. In *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet*, Peter Butter comments on the influence of Orage, who encouraged Muir to undergo psychoanalytic treatment, only to move straight to the departure for Prague, and his approach has uncritically been accepted by Elizabeth Huberman and Christopher Wiseman. In spite of such neglect, I have found the "Our Generation" material valuable as an insight into the author's development in the early 1920s, while it anticipates many of the themes in the Scottish criticism. The primary targets of "Our Generation" are social conditions, British institutions and the decline in the arts. "Muir found the Britain of 1920-22...very remote from the 'essential idea' of society", Robertson points out in his discussion of "Our Generation". Robertson continues with the following description of a Britain where living conditions were deteriorating:

After the brief post-war economic boom, inflation and unemployment had increased rapidly. By June 1921, the number of unemployed people covered by unemployment insurance was 2,171,288; the real total was presumably larger still. Unemployment benefits were paid only for limited periods, and it was not until November 1921 that family allowances for the unemployed were introduced. Families not covered by the unemployment insurance scheme, or insufficiently aided by it, had to apply to the Poor Law Guardians for outdoor relief. (Robertson 1982: 53)

One of Muir's primary concerns was the way British society tended to treat its underprivileged members as numbers rather than individuals. "[The] evil of all figures dealing with human beings is that they make us forget everything but the figures", Muir later stressed in *Scottish Journey*, which shows how strongly he felt about such matters (Muir 1935/1985: 137). Fifteen years prior to that, he had identified a similar process of dehumanisation in "Our Generation". "Ashamed of their failure to obtain work, and resentful of those who do not understand them and think they are merely lazy," he wrote on the impact of unemployment on a class, whose identity had traditionally been defined by work: "they become in the end blindly rebellious or, worse still dumbly subdued. Surely nowhere in the world is failure more cruelly punished than in this country" (Muir 1920: 29).

The writer's sympathy for the poor inspired him to a condemnation of the society that had failed its weakest. The reader is reminded of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Cloud Howe*, which is equally preoccupied with the impact of the social and economic depression on

a class-ridden society, but where Gibbon's book was fiction, Muir's account is based on facts. As a starting point, he would adopt a quotation from one of the national newspapers, then unravel the truth behind such establishment bigotry. This method meant that the press became the institution subjected to most scrutiny in "Our Generation", although the series also targeted the Church, politicians and civil administration. Muir's 1922 attack on the *Poplar Guardians* offers an indication of his outrage. In response to a report that had concluded that the Poor Law administrators had been too generous in their distribution of relief, he pointed out how the real problem was that the poor had temporarily been allowed to forget they were living on charity:

the poor must be made to feel that for a few shillings a week they must tell everything about themselves; they must sacrifice all the feelings of personal delicacy which it is human to preserve even in disaster; and in making that sacrifice they are forced involuntarily into a different category from humanity. (Muir 1922: 65)

In addition to their neglect of the poor, "Our Generation" accused the British establishment of indifference to modern art. English culture had been allowed to deteriorate, Muir argued, because of the bourgeoisie's insensibility to contemporary art. Instead they cherished an insular past that ignored all foreign influences, which was wrong because great art had always embraced the forces of change: "if Heine, Byron, Shelley and Beethoven were alive to-day, they would not, simply because they could not, ignore Lenin. For he is a force of the same scope; and great forces must recognise one another" (Muir 1921b: 42). Against the apathy, insularity and nostalgia of the upper classes, Muir placed the action, internationalism and modernity of his own generation, which is interesting as similar ideas had motivated Hugh MacDiarmid's call for a Scottish Renaissance in the early 1920s.

In August, 1921, Edwin and Willa Muir left London for the Continent. As Edwin Muir recalls in *An Autobiography*, they initially went to Prague on the advice of their acquaintance Janko Lavrin, Prague "being in the middle of Europe" (Muir 1954/1993: 170). From Czechoslovakia, they continued their journey through Germany, Italy and Austria, until in 1924 they returned to Britain. The importance of this experience for Muir's development cannot be overestimated. In the course of their travels, the Muirs picked up an intimate knowledge of the languages and literatures of Middle Europe, and over the next twenty years, that manifested itself in a number of ways. In financial terms, they were able to supplement their sometimes meagre income through translation



activities. They were the first to translate major modernist writers such as Franz Kafka and Herman Broch into English, and although Willa was probably the better linguist, such work provided her husband with an understanding of philosophical issues that would influence his poetry in the years to come. With regard to Edwin Muir's growth as a critic, the European interlude offered him an insight that he had hitherto missed because of his lack of formal education. In Prague, Dresden and Vienna, he enjoyed the music, drama and literature of a vibrant national culture, which became his benchmark in the 1930s when he turned his attention to Scottish tradition. In relation to MacDiarmid's programme for the Scottish Renaissance, it is interesting that the Muirs were the only representatives of the emerging generation of Scottish writers who had lived and travelled in Europe. Many inter-war intellectuals would emphasise the need to reconnect Scotland to the Continent, but with the exception of MacDiarmid, who adapted translations from European writers for his poetry and prose, the majority were mostly Europeans in theory. In contrast, Edwin Muir maintained a European outlook throughout his career. More than any other, it is thus his presence among the moderns that ensured the Scottish Renaissance transcended the parochialism that is the danger of all nationalisms, in order to restore the connection between Scottish art and the mainstream of European culture.

The "Our Generation" epigrams did not stop with Muir's departure for Europe in 1921, although they became less frequent until they eventually disappeared in 1922. The series is significant because it features Muir as a writer of social commentary rather than the literary criticism he has become associated with, but it suffers from inconsistencies similar to other early works such as *We Moderns* (1918) and *Latitudes* (1924). *Latitudes*, which is Muir's second book, collects the essays he had written whilst in Europe. The articles reveal a growing awareness of Scottish, English and European literature, but the writer's style is less secure than in the later prose. *Latitudes* contains important pieces such as "A Note on the Scottish Ballads" and an early Burns essay, although generalisations such as "North and South" and "Beyond the Absolute" occasionally leave the reader wondering whether speed of composition had affected Muir's critical judgement. In contrast, the next collection of essays, *Transition* from 1926, shows him coming into his own. "In *Transition* (1926) [Muir] came of age as a critic", Peter Butter observes in "'Edward Moore' and Edwin Muir": "a literary critic whose concern to understand through great writers the deeper forces moving in the age

was not divorced from the social critic's desire for the political parties to find radical answers to the problems of society" (Butter 1981: 36). In the light of his own disregard of Muir's social criticism in *Edwin Muir: Man and Poet*, Butter's comment is strange: he recognises the interaction of literature and society in Muir's criticism, yet fails to place such works as "Our Generation" or indeed *Scottish Journey* within that context.

Muir's aim in *Transition* was to evaluate contemporary literature. In the preface, he stresses the need for a critic to relate to his present because that is where he might offer the most valuable assistance, then elaborates on the difficulties of such a task. "A true judgement can only be passed by one who has a grasp of all the aspects of the case," he writes: "In the case of contemporary literature we can be witnesses, defendants, or partisans; we can be nothing more" (Muir 1926: viii). Such initial reservations should be borne in mind as we read on. James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf have become unquestionable representatives of the modernist canon, but the selection of Stephen Hudson and Edith Sitwell is more controversial. Muir did not have our benefit of hindsight in 1926, however, which is to say that the more problematic choices only confirm his thesis that a later generation would have to pass judgement. The title *Transition* refers back to Eliot's perception of the present as a state of confusion that separates an older order, theological and moral, from the new one about to arise. In the following, Muir defines his concept of an age of transition:

To understand one's age is to understand oneself, to give oneself direction and a sort of self-evident validity. The ages which permitted this understanding, such ages as the Elizabethan and the Johnsonian, increased the writer's faith in himself, allied themselves with what was productive in him, and generally made his path clear as nothing else could have done. They were ages in which certain orders of values were accepted, ages which had an image of the cosmos, society, morality, humanity, destiny, of what was wise and desirable, possible and impossible....In ages of transition, on the other hand, everything makes the writer more uncertain, saps his faith, only nourished from himself, and gives his work an air either of vacillation or of violence. His achievement may be sometimes remarkable, but always it will be partial. He will be a writer with one quality or with a few, but he will not have the complete array of qualities, each depending upon and implying the others, which a unified conception of life imposes. (Muir 1926: 203-4).

*Transition* anticipates the Scottish criticism in at least three respects. First of all, it demonstrates that Muir already held firm views on literature and society when he turned to Scottish matters in the 1930s. Like Eliot, he saw the modern age as a state of disorder,



which suggests a certain scepticism with regard to the radical elements of modernism. That did not prevent him from recognising the artistic achievement of Hugh MacDiarmid, but it may have made him more sensitive to the negative aspects of Scottish life which would support his thesis of disruption. Equally significant is the way Muir's reading of modernism in *Transition* widens the gap between a harmonious past (Orkney) and a chaotic present (Glasgow). In the mid-1920s, such a personal sense of discontinuity had still to be applied to Scottish matters, but once he turned to Scotland in the thirties, it became the foundation of his argument in *Scott and Scotland*. Finally, *Transition* is important for its approach to literature. Throughout his career, Muir stressed the connection between literature and society, on the basis of which he concluded in *Scottish Journey* and *Scott and Scotland* that the state of Scottish arts reflected the condition of Scotland as a whole. In short, there are themes in the non-Scottish criticism of the 1920s that were developed in the Scottish work of the 1930s, which underlines the need to read Muir's writings as a whole.

### Edwin Muir's Scottish journey 1929-35

Paradoxically, the book that in 1929 launched Edwin Muir's attack on Scottish Calvinism was a work commissioned by Jonathan Cape. Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, which appeared in 1918, had popularised the biographical genre, and as a result, Muir now found himself struggling with the ghost of John Knox. Muir recalls in *An Autobiography*: "As I read about him in the British Museum I came to dislike him more and more, and understood why every Scottish writer since the beginning of the eighteenth century had detested him" (Muir 1954/1993: 226). Such a realisation may have influenced the writer's campaign against Scottish Calvinism, which was intensified in the 1930s. Yet the idea was by no means new to him as he reveals in the essay 1923 "A Note on the Scottish Ballads":

What a culture there must have been once in that narrow tract of land between Edinburgh and the Border, and what a tragedy it was that its grand conception of life and death, of time and eternity, realized in pure imagination, was turned by Knox and the Reformation into a theology and a set of intellectual principles! But Knox's work has been done; it has not been undone; and time alone will show whether it ever will be. (Muir 1923/1982c: 164)

The exclamation mark at the end of the first sentence implies how strongly Muir felt about such matters. The contrast he establishes between the Scotland that had nourished

the Border ballads, and a barren, post-Reformation world, looked back to the discontinuity thesis he had adapted from Eliot, as well as to the argument in *Transition*. Meanwhile it anticipated *Scottish Journey* and *Scott and Scotland* of the mid-1930s, where similar views were expressed. Muir remained hostile towards Calvinism throughout his career, in other words, which is to say that his Knox biography was based on pre-existing biases.

*John Knox* reflects three tendencies in the non-fiction of the inter-war period: firstly, a new tradition in biography, which set out to challenge old icons, had been initiated by Lytton Strachey in 1918. As Samuel Hynes discusses in *A War Imagined*, Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* presented the stories of four representatives of Victorian values. Instead of putting these forward as exemplars for the moderns, however, the author mocked them, for by so doing, he was able to stress the remoteness of that past, as well as the fact that it no longer contained a lesson for the future. "That past might offer amusing objects for satire, examples of human folly and error", Hynes observes, "but it had nothing to do with us, on *this* side of the war" (Hynes 1992: 245). Muir's familiarity with Strachey is evident from *Transition* where he devotes an essay to the author of *Eminent Victorians*. As H. W. Mellown has suggested in his *Edwin Muir*, it is therefore likely that Muir looked to Strachey when in *John Knox* he attempted to deconstruct what had traditionally been perceived as a Scottish icon. (Mellown 1979: 31-32). In spite of their shared agenda, Muir and Strachey departed in tone. The Scot was not able to accept the past merely as "examples of human folly", which brings me to Andrew Lang as the second influence on Muir. Whether it was due to the growing secularisation in Scottish society in the late nineteenth century or because previous histories had been written by ministers, Andrew Lang's 1905 biography *John Knox and the Reformation* was the first to break with a tradition of portraying Knox as a national hero. That example was important to Muir, who aimed for a less than ideal picture of the reformer. Accordingly, his introduction acknowledges the value of Lang's work as "the one biography I have found which attempts to be critical" (Muir 1929: ix). The third tendency in *John Knox* is the historical revisionism typical of Scottish Renaissance literature generally. Like Neil Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Muir wanted to create a history that reflected his idea of Scotland, which calls into question the value of his biography as an objective account of the past.



In *John Knox*, the author applies his discontinuity thesis to Scottish history. "What Knox really did was to rob Scotland of all the benefits of the Renaissance", he concludes in the appendix: "Scotland never enjoyed these as England did, and no doubt the lack of that immense advantage has had a permanent effect. It can be felt, I imagine, even at the present day" (Muir 1929: 309). Such denunciation of Knox and the Reformation was not unprecedented in Scottish Renaissance literature, but because Muir was driven by a personal crisis of faith as well as a general rejection of the past, he expressed himself in stronger terms than most of his contemporaries. In a reading reminiscent of Eliot's "The Metaphysical Poets", he claimed that Calvinism had divided Scottish life into pre- and post-Reformation in a manner that made it impossible for present-day Scots to embrace the cosmological order he had encountered in Robert Henryson and the Scottish ballads. The novels *The Three Brothers* (1931) and *Poor Tom* (1932) developed this notion of a dissociated Scottish sensibility in relation to the concepts of Golden Age and Fall. Both works are essentially Scottish books: they are set in Scotland, they deal with fundamental aspects of Scottish character, which explains the occasional use of the vernacular in these works, although Muir's Scots was never as successful as Grassie Gibbon's. The source of the Scotland that is envisioned in the fiction is autobiographical. George Marshall devotes his study *In a Distant Isle* to a comparison between Muir's recollections of Orkney and the literary landscape of his prose and poetry, but although the critic draws our attention to the fact that *An Autobiography* represents a mythologised rather than an authentic picture of Orkney, he makes little of the personal element in the novels (Marshall 1987). In an attempt to remedy that, Margery McCulloch emphasises the parallels between autobiography and fiction in her study *Edwin Muir: Poet, Critic and Novelist*:

To a degree, all good novels are autobiographical since their success depends on their author's capacity to enter imaginatively into the scenarios which he or she creates and to draw upon previous emotional experience in order to bring them alive for the reader. Yet, despite Muir's disclaimer, one senses that *Poor Tom* and *The Three Brothers* may be autobiographical in a more specific way and that they are reworking and reinterpreting emotional crises from his past. (McCulloch 1993a: 26)

Muir's reliance on personal memories is obvious. The appearance of cousin Sutherland in *The Three Brothers*, which is supposedly set in the sixteenth century, strikes me as particularly disturbing, while other examples are Mansie's experience of Eglinton Street in *Poor Tom* and the pig-slaughter in *The Three Brothers*. Of special relevance with

regard to my argument is the portrayal of space and time, for even if it is based on personal memoirs, the image of Scotland that emerges from the narratives, fits comfortably into a more general idea of dissociation. Accordingly, the writer uses fiction to develop the contrast between a rural and an urban Scotland in order to substantiate an interpretation of history that proved the Reformation the incident that had brought the nation to its fall.

*The Three Brothers* (1931) provides the clearest indication of Muir's agenda. Set in the sixteenth century, the narrative follows the growth of the brothers Sandy, Archie and David Blackadder on a farm outside St Andrews. Their life at Falsyth is governed by the rituals of an agricultural life, which allow work and leisure to fall into an annually repeated pattern. Every year the seed is sown, the pig is slaughtered and the harvest brought in, which brings to mind *An Autobiography's* chapter on Wyre where such structures reinforced the poet's sense of cohesion and continuity. Falsyth represents the Eden of Orkney, in other words, which is symptomatic of tradition, stability and harmony. Unfortunately, the order is soon undermined by the forces of chaos. News arrives that Cardinal Beaton has been murdered in St Andrews castle, and in a passage reminiscent of Muir's 1946 poem "The Castle", the father explains to the sensitive David how a betrayal had enabled the assassins to slip in through a gate in the castle wall (Muir 1931: 10-16). Temporarily Blackadder's words satisfy his son, but a sense of intrusion follows as a result of the opening of David's eyes to another reality. Gradually, the unstable world beyond Falsyth closes in on the Blackadders until the two clash in the second part of the narrative. As a consequence of the Cardinal's murder and the Reformation, war has broken out in Scotland. From the detached position of Falsyth, the Blackadders have watched the siege of St Andrews, but they have hitherto avoided an engagement with such matters because of the distance between them and the fighting. Towards the end of part two, however, the forces of disruption intrude upon their haven. David and his father are overlooking the battle between the Protestant army and the monarch's French troops in a neighbouring field. One moment the struggle is real, the next it is not as David imagines the warriors as puppets with no place in Falsyth:

Figures rose and sank in it, like shapes floundering in a bog, gigantic in the morning dusk. The radiance in the east deepened; the miry fields struggled up to the surface of the light; and now the helmets and casques of soldiers could be seen, muskets and swords and spears rose out of the ground, and David saw a line of French soldiers advancing, and nearer at



hand, less discernible, for their backs were towards him, another line, the Scots, gradually giving way. (Muir 1931: 179-80)

With David's move to the city of Edinburgh in the concluding part of *The Three Brothers*, it becomes impossible for him to contain the disorder. The transition between rural and urban Scotland is traumatic for the adolescent David, who cannot adjust to the slums, poverty, and bigotry of the city. In spite of its sixteenth-century setting, there are passages in this part of *The Three Brothers* reminiscent of *An Autobiography*, which underlines the extent to which the fiction is based on personal recollections. In the light of this, it is interesting that *The Three Brothers* ends with David's departure for England and Europe: that is, Edwin Muir had himself escaped the squalor of his Scottish surroundings through a migration to London, and now he seems to be justifying that move through the character of David.

A similarly negative portrait of the Scottish city emerges from *Poor Tom*, which comes out of Muir's Glasgow years in the same way that Falsyth originated in Wyre. *Poor Tom* is concerned with the changing relationship between the brothers Tom and Mansie. Early in the narrative Tom develops a brain tumour as a result of an accident caused by drunkenness. At first, Mansie distances himself from the brother, whose coarse manners he considers inferior to his own. As he witnesses Tom's decline, he becomes obsessed with his brother's pain, and it is his response to human suffering which is the central theme in the novel. From the beginning of the narrative, Muir relates Tom's deterioration to a dirty, urban environment. Cousin Jean characterises his misfortune as "the portion of the corruption of Glasgow allotted to them, their private share of the corruption that was visible in the troubled, dirty atmosphere" (Muir 1932/1982a: 93). Prior to that, Mansie reflects on the slums of Eglinton Street in a passage reminiscent of *Scottish Journey*:

A fine kind of street to be in a Christian town! Blatchford was quite right, by gum; streets like this had no right to exist, people could say what they liked. A warm cloud of stench floated into his face, he hurried past a fish-and-chip shop, and in a flash Eglinton Street rose before him from end to end as something complete, solid and everlasting; it had been there all the time, he realised, and it would always be there, something you had to walk round every morning and evening, that forced you to go out of your way until at last you got used to your new road and it seemed the natural one. (Muir 1932/1982a: 85-6)

There are two conclusions to be drawn from the use of space in Muir's novels. Firstly, the contrast between rural and urban is absolute. Falsyth is associated with continuity and cohesion, Glasgow represents discontinuity and decline, and together they form a picture of a disunited nation. My second point is related to the question of time in that the transition between a rural and an urban environment is a break in human experience – once the characters have departed from innocent Falsyth, they cannot reverse their fall.

In his rendition of Edinburgh and Glasgow in *The Three Brothers* and *Poor Tom*, Muir establishes a connection between urban destitution, industrialism and Calvinism. In "A Note on the Scottish Ballads", *Transition* and *John Knox*, he had suggested that the once prosperous nation of Scotland was broken by a Reformation that split Scottish experience in two. The effects of the division were worsened in the eighteenth century, the author pointed out in *Scottish Journey*, because added to the spiritual corruption of Calvinism was a system of physical exploitation (Muir 1935/1985: 103-4). Yet the roots of such selfish individualism lay in the religious upheaval as Sandy Blackadder recognises in *The Three Brothers*:

Many a wild day I've been through since then, Davie, and many a cruel deed I've done; but then I got sick of that as well, for I could find no rest anywhere, and I saw that the Protestants at the head used the Protestants at the bottom, and that made me wild, for I was resolved that I should be used by nobody. So I made up my mind that I would get siller and power, and I gathered enough gear together from looted monasteries and other places to stock the shop. But then I found that I was still oppressed in some measure unless I kept my eyes open, and so I came to the conclusion...that you must oppress all that are under ye or weaker than ye, and stand your ground as long as you can to them that are above ye. (Muir 1931: 289-90).

What connects Calvinism and industrialism, as they are presented in *The Three Brothers* and *Poor Tom*, is the lack of respect for individual well-being. As early as 1918, Muir had noted the process of dehumanisation in *We Moderns*, and that tendency is the main reason behind Mansie and David's crises of faith. As regards the more general theme of dissociation, the first part of *The Three Brothers* and the concluding chapters of *Poor Tom* conjure up images of Scotland before and after the disruption: David grows up in an ordered, medieval world, which installs in him a sense of cohesion that allows him to withstand the forces of fragmentation. Mansie, on the other hand, is a post-Reformation Scot. No universal principles are available in his struggle to come to terms with Tom's decay, which eventually brings him to question the beliefs he originally held.



Accordingly, *Poor Tom* and *The Three Brothers* are permeated by the sense of discontinuity which Muir had been developing in his writings since 1923: the differences between David and Mansie stress a break in Scottish experience, whereas the contrast between rural Falsyth and urban Glasgow highlights the implications of the Fall.

In *Scottish Journey* (1935), Muir examines the economic, social and cultural state of the nation in the 1930s. Like *John Knox*, *Scottish Journey* was a commissioned work. The author had been asked to write a companion volume to J. B. Priestley's *English Journey*, and the road he was expected to take had already been laid out by such works as William Power's *Scotland and the Scots* and George Blake's *The Heart of Scotland*. Muir did not choose the traditional structure of such "Condition of Scotland" works, however, which in the midst of depression saw an opportunity for national revival. The three central themes in *Scottish Journey* are depression, division and discontinuity, and although he may have wished Scotland well when he originally accepted the commission, Muir seems to be losing faith in the nation as the travelogue unravels. In the introduction, he sums up his impressions:

I should like to put here my main impression, and it is that Scotland is gradually being emptied of its population, its spirit, its wealth, industry, art, intellect, and innate character. This is a sad conclusion; but it has some support on historical grounds. If a country exports its most enterprising spirits and best minds year after year, for fifty or a hundred or two hundred years, some result will inevitably follow. England gives some scope for its best; Scotland gives none; and by now its large towns are composed of astute capitalists and angry proletarians, with nothing that matters much in between. (Muir 1935/1985: 3-4)

He had expressed similar views in the 1931 essay "The Functionlessness of Scotland", but this was the first time he devoted a book-length discussion to the thesis (Muir 1931/1982c: 106). At the same time, he now derived his conclusions from an actual journey round Scotland, which is significant as he appears to have been shocked by what he saw. Muir had been back in Scotland since his departure in 1919, but with the exception of the Montrose interlude, that had been for shorter visits which did not necessarily take him into the depressed areas. In 1935, on the contrary, he sought out the areas that had been worst hit by the economic slump, and even if he had encountered slums as an adolescent in Glasgow, nothing could have prepared him for this. "Edwardian Scotland, for all its brutality and squalor," T. C. Smout observes in his

introduction to *Scottish Journey*, "was imbued with the confidence that comes with economic vitality" (Muir 1935/1985: xvii); the Scotland Muir rediscovered was not.

As an example of the "Condition of Scotland" genre, *Scottish Journey* is exceptionally rich in content. Among the issues addressed in the course of Muir's travel are the parochialism of small-town Scotland, Border life as the last manifestation of authentic Scottish culture, Walter Scott and Robert Burns as examples of a deformed literary tradition, as well as the dehumanisation of the poor which the author had noted in "Our Generation". With reference to my argument, the most interesting themes are the analysis of Scottish culture and the condition of Scotland generally, for it is in his discussion of such matters that the writer's equivocal feelings for his home country come across most clearly. In relation to the problem of national culture, Muir writes:

As I write this, it strikes me that I am not describing a Scottish scene at all. And that is true, simply because terms like Scottish and English are becoming less and less descriptive of any form of life. So although Edinburgh is Scottish in itself, one cannot feel that the people who live in it are Scottish in any radical sense, or have any essential connection with it. They do not even go with it; they look like visitors who have stayed there for a long time. One imagines that not very long ago the real population must have been driven out, and that the people one sees walking about came to stay in the town simply because the houses happened to be empty. In other words, one cannot look at Edinburgh without being conscious of a visible crack in historical continuity. (Muir 1935/1985: 23)

Although it was only in *Scott and Scotland* that he would make the claim that Edinburgh no longer existed as a national centre, the critic is obviously concerned with the same process of denationalisation that Gibbon had pointed out in *Grey Granite* (Muir 1936/1982b: 2). The loss of nationhood, Muir implies, meant that there was nothing particularly Scottish about Scottish life, which made national surroundings such as Edinburgh Castle irrelevant to modern Scots. As a result, Scottish writers were placed in an impossible position: if they insisted on their Scottishness, they had to rely on a past that had closed with the 1707 Union, if not before, which made their art of no consequence to the present; if, on the other hand, they addressed the present, they could not be Scottish as there was no sustainable Scottish identity in 1935. From such initial considerations, the argument takes a nationalist turning: "Though Scotland has not been a nation for some time, it has possessed a distinctly marked style of life; and that is now falling to pieces, for there is no visible and effective power to hold it together" (Muir



1935/1985: 25). Scottish nationalism matters, in other words, as Scotland might otherwise lose the national consciousness necessary for the development of great literature.

So far, so good. Muir has put forward an analysis of Scottish culture compatible with his thesis of discontinuity, as well as the nationalist claim that a restoration of nationhood would inspire a renaissance. Unfortunately, this does not match his observations in other parts of the travelogue. For, while the problems that have turned Edinburgh into an empty shell are related to the decline in national consciousness, the writer perceives Scotland's general crisis as anything but national in character. In the introduction Muir describes how *Scottish Journey* had been inspired by his 1934 encounter with unemployed Lanarkshire miners (Muir 1935/1985: 1). That suggests that it was intended as a personal confrontation with a depressed nation, which is confirmed by the chapter on "Glasgow", which has a clear industrial bias. This may seem paradoxical in the light of the author's personal preference for rural Scotland over the urban areas, but this is Muir writing as a social critic, not as a poet. Orkney, he stresses at the end of *Scottish Journey*, represents "the only desirable form of life that I found in all my journey through Scotland" (Muir 1935/1985: 241). Yet he recognises in a passage reminiscent of Gibbon's "The Land" that it offers no solution to the problems of modern man. It is as an exception, "an erratic fruition; an end; not a factor which can be taken into account in the painful and vital processes through which society is passing at present" (Muir 1935/1985: 241). Having discarded rural Orkney, he turns to the Scottish nation for an answer, only to be overwhelmed by its internal fragmentation. In "Edinburgh", he had longed to imagine Scotland as a coherent whole in the manner of MacDiarmid, but his concluding comments on the Highlands underlines that such unity is impossible. To Muir, Scotland remains a divided country that has failed to create a shared sense of belonging:

I reflected that Wallace had been betrayed, that David I had sold his country; I saw the first four Jameses thwarted on every side, Mary Stuart sold to the English, Charles I sold to the English, and Scotland itself sold to the English. I remembered Culloden and the Highland clans delivered helpless to Cumberland because of the intrigues and counter-intrigues of their chieftains and a few Lowland Scots; I thought of the present feud between Glasgow and Edinburgh, the still continuing antipathy between the Highlands and the Lowlands; and it seemed to me that the final betrayal of Scotland which made it no longer a nation was merely the inevitable result, the logical last phase, of the intestine dissensions which had all through its history continued to rend it. (Muir 1935/1985: 226-27)



The focus on betrayal connects the non-fictional *Scottish Journey* with *The Three Brothers*, which began with the murder of Cardinal Beaton. Although he claimed in "Glasgow" to portray "the Scotland which presents itself to one who is not looking for anything in particular, and is willing to believe what his eyes and his ears tell him", Muir seems to have arrived in Scotland with a view to identify the aspects of Scottish life that would support his discontinuity thesis (Muir 1935/1985: 101). In the light of that, it is perhaps no surprise when he suddenly develops his argument into an attack on Scottish nationalism unjustified by the facts he has hitherto put forward. Muir underlines in "Glasgow" how the dismal condition of inter-war Scotland is the result of industrialism, which is an international rather than national process (Muir 1935/1985: 102). Such a recognition of the economic basis for the crisis brings him back to the socialism of *The New Age*: only a further development of the industrial system, which will involve economic redistribution, can create a better Scotland. Unfortunately, this is not his final word on the matter. After he has established the economic roots of the crisis, the tone changes once again: "A Scotland which achieved that end would be a nation, but it would not care very much whether it was called a nation or not: the problem would have become an academic one" (Muir 1935/1985: 249). At this point, Muir is clearly contradicting himself. He tries to balance the nationalism of the Edinburgh section against the socialism of "Glasgow", only to leave the reader confused. As a result, *Scottish Journey* does not appear to have helped the writer in his struggle with Scotland as became obvious in the years that followed.

### To "Scotland" and beyond 1936-43

If *Scottish Journey* left the reader wondering as to whether nationalism or socialism provided the answer to Scotland's crisis, Edwin Muir's next publication did little to resolve the ideological confusion. As part of a thesis that challenged the relevance of the national question to present-day Scots, the author claimed in *Scott and Scotland* that Calvinism, not the loss of sovereignty, had caused the rupture within Scottish tradition. Muir's argument referred back to earlier writings such as *The Three Brothers*, which had fictionalised his experience of discontinuity. Its connection with the conclusion of *Scott and Scotland* was less than obvious, however, as the discussion closed with the



following declaration of the need for economic reforms to take precedence over constitutional matters:

I do not believe in the programme of the Scottish Nationalists, for it goes against my reading of history, and seems to me a trivial response to a serious problem. I can only conceive a free and independent Scotland coming to birth as the result of a general economic change in society, after which there would be no reason for England to exert compulsion on Scotland, and both nations could live in peace side by side. But meanwhile it is of living importance to Scotland that it should maintain and be able to assert its identity; it cannot do so unless it feels itself a unity; and it cannot feel itself a unity on a plane which has a right to human respect unless it can create an autonomous literature. (Muir 1936/1982b: 113)

Like the Grassic Gibbon of *Scottish Scene*, Muir's lack of confidence in the ability of the Scots to affect change leads him into self-contradiction. On the one hand, he identifies "autonomous literature" as a necessity if the nation is to overcome its state of internal fragmentation. On the other, he emphasises that socialism, not nationalism, is what Scotland requires, which is at odds with his insistence on Scottish difference. As in *Scottish Journey*, he diagnoses symptoms that appear national in origin, then draws from them a socialist conclusion that fits uneasily into his theories as a whole. The reader is tempted to agree with Neil Gunn, who observed in his review of *Scott and Scotland* that it was time Muir made up his mind as to whether or not Scottish nationhood was a trivial matter (Gunn 1936/1987a: 126).

Between the publication of *Scottish Journey* and *Scott and Scotland*, the Muirs had returned to Scotland, which seems to have strengthened Edwin's pessimism with regard to his native country. "[When] Edwin sat down to do *Scott and Scotland*", Willa Muir recalls in *Belonging*, "something of a very different nature emerged, with an undertone of personal exasperation in it, to be found in no other book of Edwin's" (W. Muir 1968: 195). Willa Muir blamed the bitterness she detected between the lines of *Scott and Scotland* on their 1935 move to St. Andrews, but she may be wrong to ascribe her husband's negativity to their change of environment exclusively. As part of my discussion of Muir's development in the 1920s, I mentioned the ambivalence towards Scotland that emerges from his letters, which is worth recalling at this point (p. 159). For, like Grassic Gibbon, who had discovered he could only write about the Mearns when in Hampshire, Muir was most happy about Scotland when abroad. His first Scottish pieces were written whilst travelling around Europe, while little came out of his



Montrose period; his most productive period as a Scottish critic were the years in England between 1929 and 1935, whereas his interest diminished after the 1935 homecoming. Accordingly, there appears to be something in Scotland that acted as a block on his imagination as he recognised with reference to Scott in the introduction to *Scott and Scotland*:

Scott, in other words, lived in a community which was not a community, and set himself to carry on a tradition which was not a tradition; and the result was that his work was an exact reflection of his predicament. His picture of life had no centre, because the environment in which he lived had no centre. What traditional virtue his work possessed was at second-hand, and derived mainly from English literature, which he knew intimately but which was a semi-foreign literature to him. Scotland did not have enough life of its own to nourish a writer of his scope; it had neither a real community to foster him nor a tradition to direct him; for the anonymous ballad tradition was not sufficient for his genius. (Muir 1936/1982b: 2-3)

Allan Massie argues in his introduction to the Polygon edition of *Scott and Scotland* that Scott was merely “a peg on which Muir could hang a general argument” (in Muir 1936/1982b: ii). It was not Scott’s Edinburgh that was empty, in other words, but the Scotland that Muir had encountered in the mid-1930s. Once again he was writing out of his own experience rather than providing an objective survey of the state of affairs, which calls into question his trustworthiness as a critic.

Though obviously motivated by a personal agenda, Muir pretended to provide an objective account of the impact of a Scottish environment on the creative genius of Walter Scott. In his third chapter, he compared poetry before and after the Reformation in order to demonstrate that Scottish tradition had gone astray, but this examination was clearly intended to confirm his theory of Calvinism as the distorting influence in Scottish history. Because of the Reformation, Muir claimed, the Scottish mind had become separated from the Scottish heart in a manner that made it impossible for artists to achieve the cohesion of the past (Muir 1936/1982b: 43-4). The origin of this argument was Eliot’s 1921 essay “The Metaphysical Poets”, which identified a similar “dissociation of sensibility” in seventeenth-century English poetry. In the light of that, it is ironical that Muir suggested a retreat to English literature as the solution to the Scottish predicament: “a Scottish writer who wishes to achieve some approximation to completeness has no choice except to absorb English tradition” (Muir 1936/1982b: 4). Muir’s words challenged the basis of the revival Hugh MacDiarmid had been promoting



since the early 1920s, while inspiring the author to a dismissal of Scots as a literary language. In the concluding chapter of *Scott and Scotland*, Muir thus writes:

[Scots] still exists, in forms of varying debasement, in our numerous Scottish dialects; but these cannot utter the full mind of a people on all the levels of discourse. Consequently when we insist on using dialect for restricted literary purposes we are being true not to the idea of Scotland but to provincialism, which is one of the things that have helped to destroy Scotland. If we are to have a complete and homogeneous Scottish literature it is necessary that we should have a complete and homogeneous language. Two such languages exist in Scotland, and two only. The one is Gaelic and the other is English. There seems to me to be no choice except for these: no half-way house if Scotland is ever to reach its complete expression in literature. (Muir 1936/1982b: 111)

Not surprisingly, MacDiarmid reacted strongly to the challenge, but he missed the true weakness in the argument, which is Muir's inability to accept the diversity that was the strength of Scottish inter-war literature. By 1936 *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* and *A Scots Quair* had put the potential of Scots beyond doubt, which is to say that the vernacular needed no defence against the allegations. Muir, on the contrary, had as yet been unsuccessful in his poetic experiments, which must have left him somewhat insecure with regard to the language issue: if Scottish literature was defined on the basis of the vernacular, as Gibbon maintained in "Literary Lights", the critic would be confined to a limited role; if in contrast, he could demonstrate that English was the only realistic medium for a Scottish author, his personal preference for the imperial tongue was justified, while there would be considerably more room for him to make an impact on Scottish poetry. On top of that, Muir's ambivalence about his "second" home country made him eager to prove Scotland a disappointment for creative writers. The Reformation, he stressed, and the dissociation of Scottish sensibility that was the consequence thereof, meant that only artists who put Scotland behind them, might succeed in the creation of great art. Such an argument justified the Muirs' move to London in 1919, as well as Gibbon's English exile, but it ignored the accomplishments of Hugh MacDiarmid and Neil Gunn, who had succeeded in spite of their Scottish homes. Hence *Scott and Scotland* revealed much about Muir and his problems with Scotland, whereas it contained little on the actual state of the nation.

Whether or not *Scott and Scotland* helped him come to a decision on the Scottish question, Muir's Scottish publications decrease after 1936. On the basis of that, Douglas Dunn has argued in "Edwin Muir: Poetry, Politics and Nationality" for *Scott and*



*Scotland* as “a gestural farewell to nationality as a shaping factor in the making of Muir’s poetry” (Dunn 1987: 27). Although I accept it as crucial to the criticism, I doubt that nationality was ever a “shaping factor” in the poetry, while I do not consider *Scott and Scotland* a definite break with Scotland. It is true that Muir never published another book on Scottish matters, but there may be other reasons for that. First of all, *Scottish Journey* and *Scott and Scotland* were commissioned works, which is to say that it was his publishers, not necessarily Muir himself, who had been interested in the issue. Secondly, the “Condition of Scotland” genre, which both *Scottish Journey* and *Scott and Scotland* belong to, characterises Scottish writing up to the mid-1930s, while their number declines thereafter as a possible result of a changing political and cultural climate. Meanwhile Muir might have wanted more time for his poetry, whereas the international crisis of the late 1930s, which eventually led to the Second World War, probably convinced him that there were more urgent concerns than Scotland. To these could be added the role of MacDiarmid, who had attacked Muir repeatedly since *Scott and Scotland*, although that should not be overemphasised. If Muir had had something important to say on the Scottish question, I doubt that MacDiarmid could have silenced him. As it is, MacDiarmid offered Muir a convenient excuse for a withdrawal he was likely to make anyway.

*The Story and the Fable* (1940), the first edition of Muir’s autobiography, proves that the national question did not disappear entirely from Muir’s writings. In *Edwin Muir: Poet, Critic and Novelist* Margery McCulloch notes how in the “Prague and Dresden” chapter Muir originally expressed a wish for Scottish autonomy, which was removed from the 1954 edition (McCulloch 1993: 86). Yet it is the diary extracts that completed *The Story and the Fable*, which contain the strongest argument for nationalism:

I believe that men are capable of organizing themselves only in relatively small communities, and that even then they need custom, tradition, and memory to guide them. For these reasons I believe in Scottish Nationalism, and should like to see Scotland a self-governing nation. In great empires the quality of individual life declines: it becomes plain and commonplace. The little tribal community of Israel, the little city state of Athens, the relatively small England of Elizabeth’s time, mean far more in the history of civilization than the British Empire. I am for small nations as against large ones, because I am for a kind of society where men have some real practical control of their lives. I am for a Scottish nation, because I am a Scotsman. (Muir 1940: 260)



Though reminiscent of Gunn's "Nationalism and Internationalism", this is at odds with everything Muir had said about Scottish separatism in the mid-1930s, which makes Peter Butter's decision to exclude it from the diary extracts reprinted in the Canongate edition of *An Autobiography* appear somewhat strange. Muir's words underline the complexity of his views on the national question, for, where in previous works he had opted for a socialist rather than a nationalist solution, he now seems to be approaching the position of Gunn: that is, the small nation is beneficial to the individual because it offers a sense of continuity, and to civilisation because it stimulates human values rather than undermining them.

Although such an argument represents a departure from *Scott and Scotland*, it is not incompatible with the writer's other concerns in the late thirties. For, if during the Hampstead years his prime interest had been Scotland, he now turned his attention back to the situation in Europe. Throughout the inter-war period, Muir's European outlook had manifested itself in the form of critical essays on Hölderlin, his and Willa's translations of Kafka as well as the involvement with *The European Quarterly* in 1934-35. Yet it became increasingly important towards the end of the 1930s, when the Muirs' translations of Herman Broch's novels into English and Broch's later arrival in St Andrews ensured an understanding on Edwin Muir's behalf of the threat of totalitarianism to European civilisation. "[Everything] is dark, and is getting darker", Muir observes in a 1939 letter to Sydney Schiff, then proceeds with the following analysis of the fascist threat: "There is a real denial of humanity here, as Broch says; there is more, a contempt for humanity, hatred of anyone with a separate, unique life of his own" (Muir 1939/1974: 108). In *The Story and the Fable* Muir connects such lack of respect for individual integrity with the German invasion of Czechoslovakia:

The nineteenth century thought that machinery was a moral force and would make men better. How could the steam-engine make men better? Hitler marching into Prague is connected with all this. If I look back over the last hundred years it seems to me that we have lost more than we have gained, that what we have lost was valuable, and that what we have gained is trifling, for what we have lost was old and what we have gained is merely new. The world might have settled down into a passable Utopia by now if it had not been for "progress". (Muir 1940: 257)

Muir's conclusion is probably drawn on the basis of a comparison between the vigour he had discovered in the Prague of the 1920s and the impression that such a world was coming to a close in the late thirties. Hence his insistence on the virtues of small-state

nationalism in *The Story and the Fable* reflects a growing concern over the dehumanising forces of totalitarianism, not necessarily the Scottish nationalism of Gunn and MacDiarmid.

In order to gain a full picture of Muir's struggle with Scotland towards the end of the inter-war period, it is necessary to turn to the poetry. The poet's Scottish verse divides into poems considering the nation as a whole and poems that address the specific issue of Calvinism. All see Scotland as a problem, however, "a difficult land [where] things miscarry/ whether we care, or do not care enough" (Muir 1956/1991: 219). Most significant among the poems in the first group is "Scotland 1941". Peter Butter's notes to *The Complete Poems of Edwin Muir* reveal that it was originally published in *New Alliance* in 1941, which explains the title. The theme of the poem is reminiscent of *Scottish Journey* and *Scott and Scotland*, however, which implies that the first version might have been written in the 1930s rather than the 1940s. In 1943 the poem was reprinted in *The Narrow Place* with an interesting revision: where the 1941 version had ended with the words "If we could raise these bones so brave and wrong,/Revive our ancient body, part by part,/We'd touch to pity the annalist's iron tongue/And gather a nation in our sorrowful heart", the 1943 edition reads: "Such wasted bravery idle as a song,/ Such hard-won ill might prove Time's verdict wrong,/And melt to pity the annalist's iron tongue" (Muir 1941/1991: 330 and 1943/1991: 101). The original conclusion does not promise Scots an easy way out of their present malaise, but at least it offers the possibility of revival. Muir thus removed an unequivocal manifestation of nationalism when he revised the poem for *The Narrow Place*, which indicates how important it was for him to tone down his Scottishness at this stage.

The idea of Scotland as an artistic wasteland, which is highlighted in "Scotland 1941", is reinforced by the poems that engage with Calvinism. As early as 1923, "A Note on the Scottish Ballads" had argued for Presbyterianism as an iron creed that offered Muir nothing as a poet. The Reformation brought the old cohesion to its end, and what followed was a long-term process of physical and spiritual deterioration. The 1956 poem "The Incarnate One" is probably the author's most open confrontation with his Presbyterian heritage:

The Word made flesh here is made word again,  
A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.  
See there King Calvin with his iron pen,  
And God three angry letters in a book,  
And there the logical hook



On which the Mystery is impaled and bent  
 Into an ideological instrument. (Muir 1956/1991: 213)

“The Incarnate One” attacks Scottish Calvinism, Bolshevism and any system of belief that neglects the human dimension to life. In inter-war writings such as *The Three Brothers*, *Scottish Journey* and *Scott and Scotland* Muir had demonstrated how such impersonality had made of Scotland an environment hostile to the arts and, indirectly, resulted in a divided, Scottish sensibility. At the time, this thesis was challenged by Neil Gunn and M. P. Ramsay, who thought the critic was wrong to blame the fall of Scotland on Calvinism exclusively. In his review of *Scott and Scotland*, Gunn asked why Protestantism had not killed off English and German art when it proved so disastrous for Scotland, whereas Ramsay’s 1938 pamphlet, *Calvin and Art* was meant to prove that Calvinism and art were not incompatible (Gunn 1936/1987a: 125; Ramsay 1938: 9). Their points did little to change Muir’s opinions with regard to Presbyterianism. George Marshall’s *In a Distant Isle* demonstrates to what an extent the ghost of Calvin had haunted the poet during his Orkney childhood, and as “The Incarnate One” reveals, it was only in the late 1940s, when in Rome he encountered a human dimension to Christianity that he abandoned his negativity in favour of an affirmative vision (Marshall 1987: 127-28). Accordingly, Muir’s own experience with Scottish religion had installed in him a strong opinion on theological matters as Margery McCulloch observes in *Edwin Muir: Poet, Critic and Novelist*:

Muir’s poetry springs essentially from his response to his Scottish environment and culture, a culture in which religion has had a distinctive and dominant role, and where the specific doctrines of that religion seemed at variance with the values of the social community in which he grew up and with the aspiration towards self-knowledge and self-determination of the developing human being. (McCulloch 1993: 97)

My previous examination of Muir’s writings in the late 1930s has been intended to show that he did not abandon his Scottishness after *Scott and Scotland*. He may have turned towards a poetic vision that seemed relevant to all mankind rather than the nationals of one specific country, but the questions of discontinuity and Calvinism lingered on in his work. In consequence, Edwin Muir’s struggle with Scotland remained central to his writings throughout the inter-war period, which justifies a consideration of his work within the frame of a generalised Scottish Renaissance programme.



## Edwin Muir in the Scottish Renaissance

Whilst his most productive period as a prose writer was the 1920s and 1930s, Edwin Muir's maturity as a poet only really began in the 1940s. Prior to that, he had been experimenting with different voices, including the ballad Scots of his *Scottish Chapbook* pieces, but only with the 1943 collection *The Narrow Place* did he approach the tone of his mature poetry. There are several reasons for that. First of all, the author had to overcome the frustrations emerging from his traumatic migration from an edenic Orkney to the modern hell of industrial Glasgow. Because of such personal experience, he had found it hard to look beyond a sense of dissociation, an absolute contrast between light and darkness, in the 1920s and 1930s, while in the 1940s he came to accept his trials as part of a general myth of mankind that embraced human pain as well as kindness. A second explanation is that Muir had to learn the poetic craft first. To MacDiarmid, who was naturally gifted, the growth towards a mature poetry was swift and primarily took the form of linguistic and formal experimentation. To Muir, on the other hand, whose principal concern was the ideas themselves rather than their articulation, the search for a voice was a long process, during which he tested out various stylistic and formal codes. Hence it was only in the late 1940s that he found a poetic language that could express his philosophy in a satisfactory way. Muir's late maturation is related to his world vision which is another product of the forties. While in the inter-war period, he had primarily considered the concepts of past cohesion versus present fragmentation in relation to British affairs, the Second World War brought home to him the universal scale of the disruption. Not only Scotland suffered from dissociation; the entire world was deteriorating as the writer realised in 1948 when, as a British Council employee, he witnessed the communist take-over in Czechoslovakia. As in the "Our Generation" series, where he had attacked British society for its inhuman treatment of the underprivileged, Muir objected to the communists' inability to accept the integrity of the single human being. In *An Autobiography*, he reflects on the impossible choice such a categorical system had inflected on a female friend:

They could understand a good worker, but a good human being was an abstraction which fell outside their sphere of thought and therefore a source of confusion. So they could not believe that my Czech friend really found it hard to give up her religion, or cut herself off from her parents. History, the masses, revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the final utopia when, at the great halting place of history, the state would wither away and all would be changed; what could a



private person's beliefs and affections matter compared with these great things? (Muir 1954/1993: 265-6)

Paradoxically, the nervous breakdown provoked by the author's meeting with totalitarianism may have helped him towards his mature vision. That is, several of Muir's finest poems such as "The Labyrinth" and "The Good Town" came out of his experience in Prague, pointing forwards to his celebration of the human condition in *One Foot in Eden*. In his 1956 collection, Muir underlines that it is our humanity, for good or bad, that in the end enables us to restore a sense of unity, which suggests that he has finally moved beyond the fragmentation of his inter-war work.

With regard to Scotland, Edwin Muir became increasingly detached from Scottish politics and culture towards the end of his St Andrews period. To an extent, that is the result of the troubles the Muirs encountered when in 1939, the outbreak of a second world war deprived them of their income from the German translations. At the same time, Edwin Muir was excluded from an academic environment which did not recognise the achievement of a critic whose reputation relied on newspaper writings rather than formal education. Such difficulties strengthened his image of Scotland as an environment hostile to the arts. He felt he had been let down by his home country, and his disappointment resembles that of Hugh MacDiarmid, who in the late 1930s was undergoing a similar crisis of faith. After the departure from St Andrews in 1942, Muir worked temporarily for the British Council in Edinburgh before he was sent to Prague. In 1950, he returned to Scotland one last time in order to take up the position as warden of Newbattle Abbey. Letters from the early 1950s indicate that the writer was initially happy with the new environment, as well as with his responsibility for the students. Gradually, his tone became more bitter as it dawned upon him that his ideal of liberal education did not match the Committee's wish for a vocational college, and in 1955, he decided to leave Newbattle to take up the post as Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard. In a letter composed on the verge of his departure, he sums up his feelings for Scotland: "I agree that Scotland is hard to put up with, and difficult for a poet" (Muir 1955/1974: 174). Such disillusionment probably influenced Muir's account of Scotland in *An Autobiography*, which was written during the Newbattle years. In the end, he thus decided to exclude from that work his involvement with the Scottish movement in the 1920s and 1930s because that meant he did not have to engage with such sensitive matters. Scotland did not disappear entirely from his writings. In *One Foot in Eden*,

Muir's home country was reimagined as "The Difficult Land", whereas the final diary extracts from Swaffham Prior, 1958, returned to his Glasgow years (Muir 1954/1993: 293-94). Whether or not he wanted to do so, Scotland was too intimate a part of his being, in other words, to allow for a complete withdrawal.

Even if his writings show Edwin Muir taking a stand on Scottish questions, it is necessary for the reader to take into consideration his life-long problems in coming to terms with Scotland. With reference to that, a comparison between Willa Muir's *Belonging* and her husband's autobiographies is illuminating, for, whereas Edwin cuts his involvement with the Scottish Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s down to a mere twenty pages out of 277 in *An Autobiography*, Willa makes them appear somewhat more substantial. That enables her to elaborate on the developing friendship between Muir and MacDiarmid during the Montrose spell of 1924-25 (W. Muir 1968: 115-16). She reflects on the 1932 P.E.N. Congress in Hungary, where Muir had stood up for an independent Scottish organisation, whilst reminding the reader that *Scott and Scotland* did not come out of nothing, but was part of the *Voice of Scotland* series (W. Muir 1968: 153 and 194). To adopt Muir terminology, one is well advised to read Willa's account as Story, Edwin's as Fable. Although it underlines how selective Edwin Muir's account is, *Belonging* does not explain why. In the previous chapter, I mentioned the difference in tone between *The Story and the Fable* and *An Autobiography*, where the more nationalist sections had disappeared, and that may offer a clue (pp. 181-82). When in 1954 the author sat down to bring his story up to the present, his bad feelings for Scotland had been reinforced by his recent troubles at Newbattle, which left him with little inclination to write of his association with the Scottish Renaissance. As a result, Muir's writings leave the impression that he had disappeared as a Scottish writer between 1940 and 1954.

A second difficulty with Muir as a spokesman for the Renaissance is the pessimism that runs through his criticism of the 1930s. Because he perceived Scottish experience in terms of dissociation, he was unable to "see Scotland whole", which is an essential difference between him and MacDiarmid. Muir's Scottish nation is "the difficult country"; his Scots the Covenanters at Bothwell Brig or the Jacobites at Culloden, whose internal disunity brings about their destruction, and that makes the Renaissance programme of national regeneration somewhat unsatisfying to him (Muir 1935/1985: 227). Had there existed a Scottish nation to promote it, such ideals would have been



fine, but in the poet's interpretation, the historic fall of Scotland meant there no longer existed such a thing. Muir writes in *Scottish Journey*:

If there was a really strong demand for such a union, England could not withhold it, nor probably attempt to do so. The real obstacle to the making of a nation out of Scotland lies now in the character of the people, which is a result of their history, as their history was in large measure of the things of which I have been speaking, geographical and racial. And that obstacle, being the product of several centuries of life, is a serious one; it is, in fact, Scotland. (Muir 1935/1985: 231-32)

At various stages of his career, the author puts forward socialism, Douglasism and guild socialism as alternatives to nationalism, but he fails to convince. He is at his best when identifying the shortcomings of a nationalist vision, whereas he finds it harder to develop substitute creeds, which suggests he had no viable answer himself. In short, Muir is powerful in his analysis of the condition of Scotland, but has no affirmative vision to match those of Gunn and MacDiarmid.

My final problem with a reading of Muir within the context of the Scottish Renaissance is also the most important as it may explain his curious omission of the Scottish years from *An Autobiography*, as well as the lack of a positive vision. In the introduction I quoted Muir's 1927 letter to the Thorburns, but it is worth repeating at this point: "I feel rather detached, as I've often told Grieve, because after all I'm not Scotch, I'm an Orkney man, a good Scandinavian" (Muir 1927/1974: 64). The reader should not overemphasise Muir's insistence on the Scandinavian element, for, as opposed to Eric Linklater, he never visited Scandinavia or included Nordic references in his writing. Yet his sense of distance is significant: Willa Muir recalls in *Belonging* how her husband's understanding of the language problem differed from MacDiarmid's because of his Orcadian roots, and Muir's perception of himself as outsider within Scottish letters may well have influenced his stance on other Renaissance ideas, too (W. Muir 1968: 115-16). The effects of such detachment were strengthened by the fact that he wrote most of his Scottish criticism abroad. After the 1919 departure for London, he spent most of his life outside Scotland because he found it easier to be accepted there, which undoubtedly coloured his feelings for the homeland. In a letter composed only twenty five days after his return to Scotland in 1924, Muir writes: "Scotland has been a sad disappointment to us after all the longing we had for it, so shut in, unresponsive, acridly resolved not to open out and live. For our own sake we shall not live here for long, not more than two months I think, if we can help it" (Muir 1924/1974: 41).

Apparently, the Muirs could not help it, for they remained in Montrose for another year, but Edwin's disenchantment is clear: he had returned after three years in Europe with the intention of settling down. His cosmopolitan attitudes did not suit small-town Scotland, however, which brought him to the conclusion that he could expect no recognition from his compatriots. In order to accept Scotland, he went to England in 1929 in a move that sums up his relationship with his native country: that is, Edwin Muir is outsider when he is inside, insider when out, and such ambivalence makes him unable to come to terms with Scotland.



## **Conclusion**

**The Dissociated Imagination?**

## The dissociated imagination?

In "The Name and Nature of Modernism", Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's introduction to *Modernism* (1991), the editors question the notion of one, unified modernist movement:

Modernism was indeed an international movement and a focus of many forces which reached their peak in various countries at various times. In some it seemed to stay for a long period; in others, to function as a temporary disturbance and then go away again. In some it seemed to do great violence to the received tradition - of Romanticism or Victorianism, Realism or Impressionism - and in others it seems a logical development of it. Indeed Modernism can look surprisingly different depending on where one finds the centre, in which capital (or province) one happens to stand. Just as "modern" in the England of today can mean something very different from what it meant a century ago for Matthew Arnold, so it can also be observed varying significantly from country to country, from language to language. (Bradbury/McFarlane 1991: 30-1)

The discrepancies within the Scottish Literary Renaissance, which I have tried to bring out through my examination of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir, underline the absurdity of a too essentialist conception of modernism in Scotland. If the critic accepts language as the central issue, the main proponents of modernist experimentation are MacDiarmid and Gibbon, who tried to develop the Scots vernacular into a literary vehicle suitable for modern thought. If one considers the European dimension, on the other hand, which is emphasised in much of the inter-war propaganda, the protagonist of the Scottish revival must be Muir, who actually lived on the Continent where most of his colleagues were internationalists in theory only. Finally, a study concerned with geographical decentralisation might name Gunn the central author in the Renaissance on the basis of his Highland novels, which placed the most north-easterly corner of Scotland on the literary map of Europe. Accordingly, there is not one Scottish Renaissance, but many; not one or two single spokespersons, but several, depending on which thematic and ideological considerations lie at the back of our interpretation.

A similar concern with alternatives to the traditionally unifying conception of literature is manifest within Scottish tradition in such publications as *Gendering the Nation* (1995) and *A History of Scottish Women's Writing* (1997), which highlight the multiplicity of voices within Scottish literature. The theoretical basis of this revisionism



is the Russian critic M. M. Bakhtin. With specific reference to language, Cairns Craig shows in *The Modern Scottish Novel* (1999) how Bakhtin allows us to deconstruct the unitary approach to nations and nationalism:

The idea of the nation as a single and unified totality is itself an invention required by a specific phase of the development of the system of nation-states in the global development of modernity, one which has continued to exert enormous influence in British culture precisely to the extent that England has been presented as the most effective example of such a unity. The nation-as-unity is the reflex of an idea of the nation as founded on linguistic purity and homogeneity, but as Bakhtin pointed out, such conceptions of a unitary language are in fact the expression of a desire to limit what is fundamental to the nature of language - its diversity and its tendency to fragment into a multiplicity of voices: (C. Craig 1999: 30-31)

Thanks to the effort of critics over the past decades, I think we have reached a point where England is no longer taken to be the absolute model for national development, which is crucial for a recognition of Scottish tradition. In the course of my discussion, I have tried to go one step further. For, although Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir are all established representatives of Scottish modernism, their visions are by no means identical. Whilst substantiating Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane's claim for modernism as the meeting of different agendas, this lack of cohesion implies that the Bakhtinian notion of pluralism could be applied to the mainstream of Scottish literature. That is, the critic may identify a number of recurring themes in the literature, as I proposed in my initial chapter, but as the previous discussion has demonstrated, these motifs are employed in different ways by the individual authors. In consequence, I would argue for the Scottish Literary Renaissance as a variety of discourses rather than a movement, and I hope my point will be proved by this concluding re-examination of the visions of MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir in the light of the general themes of geography, history, religion, language and literature which I introduced earlier in the "Voice of Scotland" section (pp. 33-48).

## Voices of Scotland

I believe my analyses of the individual visions of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Edwin Muir have demonstrated the extent to which a concern with the state of the nation brought each author to reconsider Scotland and his own relation to it. All writers came from rural backgrounds, which installed in them a strong sense of

the native tradition that had survived in such areas. It is thus unlikely that Gibbon and MacDiarmid would have been inspired to experiment with the Scots language, had they not had first-hand experience with the Mearns and Border dialects themselves. At the same time, these artists decided to write about Scotland in an age when such allegiances might have inhibited their growth. The publishing market was controlled by London, the largest audience for literature was English, which only seemed to leave a limited scope for intellectuals who favoured a less centralised perspective. MacDiarmid, Muir, Gibbon and Gunn parted company over ideological matters and indeed the probability, or improbability, of a restoration of Scottish nationhood. Yet they recognised that something was wrong with Scotland and felt compelled to act upon it. As a result, they used literature to draw attention to the political, economic, social and cultural conditions of the nation in a manner that is characteristic of the period literature as a whole.

Just as the idea of present depression versus future regeneration reflected the interests of a majority of Scottish intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s, the themes that recur in the writings of my chosen writers are symptomatic of their age. As I discussed in my analyses of the individual artists, the inter-war concern with geography, history, religion, language and literature was prominent in the work of MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir, and it undoubtedly contributed to their different ideas of Scottishness. On the most general level, that made these motifs crucial in the construction of Scotland as an imagined community in the 1920s and 1930s. As the previous inquiry has underlined, my four spokesmen for the Renaissance did not necessarily unite in their approach to such issues, however. In an attempt to foreground such tension, I therefore want to end with a consideration of the five themes in relation to the particular visions of Scotland that emerged from the chapters on MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon and Muir. I shall begin with a summary of the general idea as it comes across in the majority of inter-war texts, move on to an examination of the positions the authors adopted with regard to the specific issue, then finish with a reflection on the possible implications. As a conclusion to my argument, it is my intention to construct a discourse between four key writers of the period in order to identify some fundamental problems in relation to the Renaissance idea.

### *Geography:*



As I discussed in chapter one, the revaluation of geography in Scottish Renaissance writing combined a constructive and a deconstructive strategy. In the passage from *Scotland and the Scots* that introduced my initial consideration of space, William Power described how his contemporaries were stripping the nation of the false imagery of the past (p. 37), and my four representatives seem to be motivated by similar concerns. In the prologue to *Sunset Song*, Gibbon stresses how Kinraddie aimed to balance out the rival claims of Kailyard and anti-Kailyard, whereas Gunn's first novels challenge the Celtic Twilight ideology of Fiona Macleod in particular (p. 125 and 102). In *Scottish Journey*, Edwin Muir observes how Barrie, Scott and Burns distorted the perception of the Scottish scene, while Hugh MacDiarmid rejects what he termed the "Thibetisation" [sic.] of the Highlands and Islands in his *Islands of Scotland* (Muir 1935/1985: 43-44, 57-61, 89-90; MacDiarmid 1939: 18). Gibbon, Gunn, Muir and MacDiarmid thus agree about the need to demolish any false ideas of Scotland as a land of romance or Celtic Twilight.

As regards the image that is chosen to replace the stereotypes, there is less consensus among the four. All prefer a rural vision to the Scotland represented by Glasgow and the Industrial Belt, but the local bases of their imagined communities differ, as do the ideological messages conveyed. Gunn's Highland villages come out of the author's childhood landscape of Caithness, while Gibbon's Kinraddie reflects the Mearns. Muir's "organic community" represents an imaginative reworking of his native Orkney, while MacDiarmid's second "Direadh" constructs an image of Scotland through the fusion of all the complexities of a Border scene. Accordingly, each artist approaches Scotland from a stance that is geographically specific, which raises the question of whether or not he has the right to presume to speak for the nation on such a narrow ground.

Geographical specificity in itself is not a problem, for the fiction of William Faulkner proves that it is possible to channel the entire Southern experience through the novelist's home county in Mississippi, whereas Joyce universalised Dublin. More often than not, the portrait of the Scottish landscape is tied to the writers' political beliefs, however, which causes friction.

The first problem with the Renaissance geography is the conflict between reality and fable. The inter-war writers emphasised in their criticism that their rural visions conveyed no complete image of the nation. In "Literary Lights" Gibbon points out that the real test of his method would have to be the modern city, while Edwin Muir stresses

in *Scottish Journey* that Glasgow represents the heart of modern Scotland in terms of numbers (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 205; Muir 1935/1985: 102). Occasionally, such an awareness of the contrast between the reality of urban Scotland, where most Scots live, and the countryside which dominates the literature, brings the writers to reflect on the city experience as in Gibbon's *Grey Granite* and Gunn's *Wild Geese Overhead*.

Alternatively, it might force upon them a need to justify their vision. In relation to this, two strategies are particularly common. The first involves an acceptance of the fact that ruralism has become impossible as a result of historical change, and the classic exponent of this view is Gibbon, who writes in "The Land":

They change reluctantly, the men and women of the little crofts and cottar houses; but slowly a quite new orientation of outlook is taking place. There are fewer children now plodding through the black glaur of the wet sommer storms to school, fewer in both farm and cottar house. The ancient, strange whirlimagig of the generations that enslaved the Scots peasantry for centuries is broken. (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 302)

Within the same category, I would place the Muir of *Scottish Journey* and the Gunn of *The Grey Coast*, *The Lost Glen* and *Morning Tide*, for these works suggest that a rural ideal cannot represent contemporary Scotland. The alternative to the "death of the countryside" approach is to move beyond realism towards the sphere of myth and fable. In *Out of History* Cairns Craig discusses how Scottish Renaissance writers found it difficult to relate to the problem of history in a satisfactory manner, and he substantiates his argument with references to the personal mythologies that Muir, Gunn and MacDiarmid developed towards the end of the 1930s (C. Craig 1996: 48-56). What connects Muir's portrayal of a harmonious, never-changing Wyre, MacDiarmid's recovery of an ideal Scotland through his Gaelic Muse, and "the other landscape" of Gunn's later works, is the representation of landscape as a symbol of permanence in a world that is threatening to fragment. "Behind the world of time and history lies this eternal geometry of the landscape", Craig writes: "an image in geological formation of what the mind can strive after, 'a condition of no connection with time at all'" (C. Craig 1996: 55). I find Craig less convincing when he applies his thesis to Gibbon, which is perhaps not surprising, given the Mearns writer's preoccupation with marxist evolution.

The question of realism versus idealism determines to what extent the individual author manages to "see Scotland whole". Many inter-war intellectuals saw a united Scotland as the precondition for a restoration of nationhood, and the authors most



obsessed with unity also appear to have been the keenest supporters of nationalism. With reference to the four writers in question, Muir and Gibbon show a lack of confidence in a possible re-unification of Scotland's various factions, where Gunn and MacDiarmid view the Highlands and Lowlands as one. In response to the image of fragmentation, the jigsaw nation that Muir denounced at the end of *Scottish Journey* (p. 176), Gunn observes in *Whisky and Scotland* how the Lowland response to the Reformation proves the integrity of the Scottish spirit:

Why didn't the Teutonic Lowlands show the same charming reaction as Teutonic England? Actually Highlands and Lowlands behaved alike, striving for the same end with the same fury, the *furor caledoniensis* or *perfervidium scotorum* of historic Scotland. Accordingly – for nothing moved the spirit more profoundly than religious feeling – I am compelled to conclude that spiritually the Highlands and Lowlands are akin over against England, and not England and the Lowlands over against the Highlands. (Gunn 1935: 101)

MacDiarmid takes the ideal of a (re-)united Scotland one step further when in *Lucky Poet* he declares his Scotland a unit composed of all differences (MacDiarmid 1943: 324).

From the treatment of Scottish geography in the work of MacDiarmid, Muir, Gunn and Gibbon, I will draw two conclusions. First of all, the image of the nation in the literature is derived from the artists' individual experiences of a rural Scotland. The writers recognise that their visions cannot be maintained without a withdrawal into the realm of myth, which is to say that the most realistic portraits of Scotland are critical of ruralism because it constitutes an impossible dream in twentieth-century Scotland. Equally significant is the striving towards an idea of a united Scotland. Such an inclusive vision requires a high degree of idealism and confidence in the nation, which is available to MacDiarmid and Gunn, who had found in Scottish nationalism a solid foundation for a "Scotland whole". Muir and Gibbon, on the other hand, lack such an ideological anchor, and their images of the nation consequently fragment.

### *History:*

The most common interpretation of the past in the inter-war literature is in terms of discontinuity. Where nineteenth-century intellectuals had accepted Scottish history as constant progress towards the evolutionary height of their own age, their Renaissance successors were less enthusiastic. The key events in Renaissance historiography were

the Reformation, the 1707 Union of Parliaments and the Industrial Revolution, but as MacDiarmid points out in *Albyn*, they were interrelated:

The explanations of Scotland's leeway lie in the Reformation, the Union with England and the Industrial Revolution. If I isolate the second of these as the main cause, it is because it was indispensable to the consummation and continuance of the first and largely determined the effect upon Scotland of the third.... At all events the effect of all these three causes was overwhelmingly repressive and anti-Scottish. (MacDiarmid 1927/1996a: 11-12).

As I argued previously, a central factor in the revaluation of history is the process of demythologisation which dismissed traditional figures such as Mary Queen of Scots and Bonnie Prince Charlie in favour of ordinary people (p. 40). Their accounts of the past brought the Renaissance writers to discussions of the present, the inter-war Depression, as well as the possible future for the nation. Once again, the individual author's idea of Scotland was influenced by his/her ideological stance, and a recurring theme is the possible restoration of nationhood. The motivation behind Scottish Renaissance historiography seems to be an attempt to initiate a process of national regeneration, in other words, which might bring about the rebirth of Scotland.

With reference to the individual histories of Muir, MacDiarmid, Gunn and Gibbon, there seems to be a consensus about the Reformation, the Union and industrialism as the three key events in Scottish history. All recognise the connection between these episodes, but differ in their interpretations. To MacDiarmid, the main issue is denationalisation. Following upon the disastrous Battle of Flodden, which in 1513 had brought the Golden Age of James IV to an end, the Reformation weakened the nation even further when, on the one hand, it severed the old alliance between Scotland and France, while strengthening, on the other, the Scottish ties with England. (MacDiarmid *Albyn* 1927/1996a: 12). Once Scotland started to absorb English manners, it was easy to introduce the Union of Parliaments which put an end to Scottish autonomy, whilst increasing the effects of anglicisation. The decline of Scotland culminated with the Industrial Revolution, which would have spread, MacDiarmid claims, "to Scotland much less injuriously if England had suddenly disappeared about 1700" (MacDiarmid 1927/1996a: 11). Although driven by similar ideas about the erosion of Scottish nationhood, Neil Gunn is less concerned with the dangers of English influence in Scotland, and more with the internal disintegration that manifested itself in the form of the Highland Clearances, emigration and a general loss of belief among Scots in their



capacity to decide for themselves. Gunn would agree that the consequences of the Reformation and the Union were disastrous for the nation, while his Highland origins inspire him to an examination of the Clearances in relation to industrialism. Only a Scot, Gunn observes in *Whisky and Scotland*, could have composed the oath that broke the spirit of the Gael in the aftermath of the Jacobite Risings (Gunn 1935: 71); only Scots might put a halt to the decline and restore prosperity to the nation. Like MacDiarmid, Gunn looks to nationalism for an answer: if Scotland was to experience a second Golden Age, it would require native genius and control, for it was the loss of nationhood, accompanied by anglicisation and internal division, that had brought the nation to its fall.

Edwin Muir and Lewis Grassie Gibbon share the view that the Scottish sense of nationhood had been changed by the Reformation, Union and industrialisation, but they remain critical of Gunn and MacDiarmid's emphasis on the national question as the key issue. Nationhood matters, but only when it is part of the experience of ordinary Scots; when imposed from above, it is insignificant at best, oppressive at worst. In *Scottish Journey* Muir reflects on the insignificance of Scottish autonomy to the majority of the population:

If the Nationalists' ideas were put into practice it would no doubt help to redress the inequality between the two countries: the unemployed figures in Scotland would probably decrease, and those of England simultaneously go up; that is, assuming that the present industrial system continued. There would still be a fairly big residue of unemployment; the slums would still exist as they are; the great majority of the people would still be poor; the workman would still live in fear of being thrown out of his job. In return the population would have the comfort of knowing they were citizens of an independent Scotland, of being poor on Scottish notes and coins instead of on English, of drawing the dole from a Scottish Government instead of the present one, and of being examined on Dunbar and Burns in the schools in place of Shakespeare and Milton. (Muir 1935/1985: 246-7).

To Muir, the loss of sovereignty is not a vital issue. As I shall return to in my discussion of religion, he saw the Reformation as the main event in Scottish experience because it broke the connection between the Golden Age of James IV and post-Reformation Scotland. In addition, it twisted the minds of ordinary Scots and inspired the capitalist ethos that eventually cleared the Highlands and built the Glasgow slums. Muir's interest in the impact of history on the conditions of the Scottish people resembles that of Gibbon, whose reading of history underlines how major events had affected ordinary

folk. In "The Antique Scene" the novelist suggests that nationhood is only significant when it comes from the people. The struggle of William Wallace's Army of the Commons, for example, is crucial because it represents a popular rising against an invading oppressor, whereas Robert the Bruce's strategic manoeuvres, which mostly involved the aristocracy, hardly matters at all (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 27-28). On a similar note, Gibbon stresses that the Reformation might have been turned into victory for the commoners, had Knox's ideas of social reform prevailed. Instead it was expropriated by the nobility, with the people suffering as a result (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 31). Towards the end of "The Antique Scene", the 1745 Rising, which the author presents as a last stand for Highland culture, is connected with the arrival of an industrial system:

[Prince Charles's] final defeat at Culloden inaugurated the ruthless extirpation of the clan system in the Highlands, the extirpation of almost a whole people. Sheep-farming came to the Highlands, depopulating its glens, just as the Industrial Revolution was coming to the Lowlands, enriching the new plutocracy and brutalizing the ancient plebs. Glasgow and Greenock were coming into being as the last embers of the old Scots culture flickered and fuffed and went out. (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 36)

Like Muir, Gibbon is pessimistic with regard to a present and future for Scotland. The Scottish nation had proven its incapacity in the past, which left internationalism as the only viable answer to the inter-war crisis. Accordingly, nationalism and internationalism seem mutually exclusive to Muir and Gibbon in a way they never were to Gunn and MacDiarmid.

To conclude, the four writers generally agree on which events caused the decline of the nation, but disagree over their implications. It is interesting that the authors who found it hardest to imagine Scotland as a unit, also have the greatest difficulties with the concept of Scottish nationhood. Instead of a restoration of nationhood, which MacDiarmid and Gunn promote as the future for Scotland, Muir and Gibbon focus on social reconstruction. Because of their unfortunate disbelief in the Scottish nation, however, they have little confidence that the Scots may affect that change for themselves, which in the end leaves reform to be imposed from without.

*Religion:*



A central concern in the Renaissance literature is the question of Calvinism. Though there remained support for Presbyterianism within the political wing of the national movement, the consensus among the creative writers was that the introduction of a Protestant religion in the sixteenth century had broken the continuity of Scottish experience and that Scottish literature suffered as a consequence. The main consideration is the Reformation legacy. Before the introduction of Calvinism, the Renaissance writers argued, the Scottish nation had enjoyed the benefits of a strong culture that was able to retain its connection with Europe whilst remaining Scottish in orientation. After the Reformation, image-making, which is at the core of art, was attacked because of its association with Catholicism. Scottish painting, music and drama were discouraged, whilst the artists lost the patronage that had hitherto been provided by the Roman Church. Scotland became an artistic wasteland, and its national culture declined in consequence thereof.

Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Edwin Muir and Lewis Grassie Gibbon unite in their perception of Calvinism as a disaster for the Scottish nation. As I discussed in the previous section, the Reformation is commonly portrayed as the beginning of Scotland's decline, and a connection is drawn between the fanatic individualism inspired by Presbyterianism and the inhuman system of capitalism. There is also general consensus that Calvinism twisted the Scottish mind. Before the Reformation, the Scottish world picture could be expressed through the harmonious, balanced poetry of Robert Henryson; after the Reformation, Scots were forced into a position of partisanship, which severed all ties between the old Catholic Scotland and the Calvinist Scotland emerging. Edwin Muir writes in *Scott and Scotland*:

[Just] at the moment when this literature should have flowered most splendidly it was cut off, and that dissension arose which has troubled Scotland ever since, and has not yet been composed. If this is true, then it is not fair to say of Scotland in general that the things which divide it are of more importance than the things which unite it: for that is true historically only of Protestant Scotland. The Scotland of James IV shows us a coherent civilization, and in the individual writer thought and feeling harmoniously working together. Calvinism drove a wedge between these two things, and destroyed the language in which they had been fused.  
(Muir 1936/1982b: 44)

The break in Scottish experience is of particular significance to the poets. In their search for a literature that was at once Scottish and universal, traditional and yet in the mainstream of European culture, Muir and MacDiarmid looked to the examples of

Robert Henryson and William Dunbar, who proved to the twentieth-century writers the vitality of Scottish writing in the past. Both these writers had been Catholics, of course, which seems to have appealed to the moderns. Hence MacDiarmid's earliest proposals for a Scottish revival involved what he termed a "neo-Catholic" movement, whereas Muir reveals in his autobiography how he was drawn towards the Roman Church late in life (MacDiarmid 1916/1984a: 14; Muir 1954/1993: 274-75). If they accept Catholicism as an alternative to Calvinism that might be more sympathetic to the arts, the poets differ in their interpretation of the Reformation. As I discussed previously, Edwin Muir is concerned with the way Calvinism broke the continuity of Scottish life (p. 168ff.). Before 1560, the Scottish world vision had been complete in his view, thought and feeling working together to produce great art; after 1560, the Scottish mind became dissociated and one could no longer achieve greatness within Scottish tradition. Accordingly, the legacy of the Reformation was the dissociation of Scottish sensibility, which Muir explores in *Scott and Scotland*. MacDiarmid would agree with the notion that something crucial had been lost with the Reformation. In *Albyn* he stresses that the cultural sterility of the Scottish nation was a product of the Calvinist mind, but where Muir was pessimistic, MacDiarmid looks for hope:

The Reformation, which strangled Scottish arts and letters, subverted the whole national psychology and made the dominant characteristics of the nation those which had previously been churl elements. The comparative cultural sterility of the latter is undeniable. A premium was put upon Philistinism. There has been no religious poetry – no expression of "divine philosophy" – in Scotland since the Reformation. As a consequence Scotland today is singularly destitute of æsthetic consciousness. The line of hope lies partially in re-Catholicization, partially in the exhaustion of Protestantism. (MacDiarmid 1927/1996a: 12).

MacDiarmid ties the decline in Scottish culture to the erosion of Scottish nationhood and therein lies the source of his optimism. If the main forces of disruption strengthened by Calvinism are anglicisation and the decline in Scottish sovereignty, the flaws may be remedied through a re-nationalisation of Scotland. As a result, the Calvinist legacy is political to MacDiarmid where it seems personal to Muir.

Least concerned with the Reformation are the novelists Gunn and Gibbon. The break in Scottish culture, which is so central to the poets, does not apply to the same degree to writers of prose, for the novel is a comparably recent form and therefore untouched by the disruption. Where Gunn and Gibbon comment on the Reformation, it is because of



its historical rather than its cultural significance, which leaves them with a slightly different perspective. The portraits of Calvinism in Gunn and Gibbon may be divided into critical accounts of the past controversies and fictional representations of the Calvinist mind. As regards the former, the novelists agree with MacDiarmid and Muir's identification of the Reformation as a breaking point in Scottish life, but they pick a political and a socio-historical reading as opposed to the poets' cultural one. Gunn establishes in his 1936 review of *Scott and Scotland* that the Reformation primarily mattered as a symptom of the general erosion of Scottish nationhood in the sixteenth century, which would eventually clear the way for the nation's assimilation into Britain (Gunn 1936/1987a: 125). This reading may be ascribed to his Highland origins, which made the religious controversies peripheral, although his concern with the state of the Scottish nation was probably a factor too. To Gibbon, the Reformation represented a failed struggle for social justice. In "The Antique Scene", he praises the heroism of the Covenanters, whose energy could have been turned into a force of change, but they were sadly defeated, and their only legacy became that of religious fanaticism, which to the author is symptomatic of a repressed spirit (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 33-34). With reference to their depiction of Calvinism in the fiction, both novelists view the influence of Presbyterianism as disruptive, although they part company over its implications. Where in *The Serpent* Gunn uses protagonist Tom's God-haunted father to comment on a faith peculiar to Scotland, Gibbon's portrait of John Guthrie belongs with his denunciations of religion more generally.

As with history and geography, Gunn, Muir, MacDiarmid and Gibbon meet in their over-all attack on Calvinism, but disagree in their interpretation of the details. To Muir, the Calvinist legacy is one of cultural disruption, while MacDiarmid relates it to the question of nationhood. To Gunn, the Reformation is mainly read in terms of politics, whereas Gibbon interprets it as a case of social history. Hence my four Renaissance representatives come together in their attack on Scotland's Presbyterian legacy, but do so for individual reasons, which leaves them short of a cohesive vision.

### *Language:*

Though Muir's "dissociation of Scottish sensibility" thesis derived from his quarrel with Calvinism, as well as his reading of Eliot, it is with reference to language that it became notorious. Yet the general attitude to the language issue was liberal in the 1920 and

1930s. Most intellectuals admired MacDiarmid's experiment with Scots because it had resulted in poetry that was at once modernist and Scottish, but they wrote English nonetheless. The consensus was that literature was possible within all Scotland's three languages of Scots, English and Gaelic, which meant a departure from the nineteenth-century preference of Standard English over the vernacular, but for most authors the potential of Scots was a theoretical consideration only. The reviews that welcomed MacDiarmid's vernacular verse did so in the Imperial tongue, and by 1932 the predominance of English over Scots and Gaelic had become so obvious in contemporary Scottish literature that Eric Linklater declared the Scottish Renaissance "goals scored on English ground" (in Thomson *Scotland in Quest of Her Youth* 1932: 165).

Although Scottish Renaissance writers in practice employed whatever medium they preferred in spite of its political connotations, the theoretical attitude to language changed around 1934. From 1922, MacDiarmid had stressed the necessity of Scots, but he seems to have accepted that his fellow-writers' preference for English was not necessarily incompatible with a loyalty to the Renaissance idea more generally. In contrast, the choice between Scots or English became a declaration of allegiance to either a pro-Scots or a pro-English faction in the 1930s, and the main reason for that is the changing tone of the polemics. Neither MacDiarmid, Muir or Gibbon, who all held strong opinions on the language question, departed radically from the beliefs they had voiced in earlier work, when in the mid-1930s they returned to the issue. Where they had previously seemed relatively secure with regard to language, however, they now became increasingly sensitive. MacDiarmid, who had achieved great feats in the vernacular in the 1920s, felt threatened when in the 1930s he found that English, which he had attacked ferociously in his earlier criticism, in fact proved the most suitable vehicle for his developing vision. Meanwhile Muir, who had tested his own ability in Scots in the mid-twenties and found it wanting, saw a need to justify his own choice of English over Scots. Gibbon, finally, appeared to have made up his mind when in a somewhat overwritten passage from "Literary Lights" he claimed that the majority of his fellow-Scots failed to qualify as Scottish writers because they had opted for an English medium:

With a few exceptions presently to be noted, there is not the remotest reason why the majority of modern Scots writers should be considered Scots at all. The protagonists of the Scots literary Renaissance deny this. They hold, for example, that Norman Douglas or Compton Mackenzie, though they write in English and deal with un-Scottish themes, have



nevertheless an essential Scottishness which differentiates them from the native English writer. In exactly the same manner, so had Joseph Conrad an essential Polishness. But few (except for the purpose of exchanging diplomatic courtesies) pretend that Conrad was a Polish writer, to be judged as a Pole. He wrote brilliantly and strangely and beautifully in English; so does Mr. Norman Douglas, so does Mr. Cunninghame Graham. (Gibbon/MacDiarmid 1934: 198)

Gibbon's argument is absurd. The novelist had himself admitted in the introductory note to *Sunset Song* that his vernacular prose was to be regarded as an experiment within Standard English, and he continued to compose most of his fiction in English in spite of his strong views on Scots. Gibbon's rhetorics are therefore relevant to the language discussion mostly because they illustrate how language was made an issue.

The principal protagonists in the language dispute are Edwin Muir and Hugh MacDiarmid. If the conflict is dated from the publication of *Scott and Scotland* in 1936, which brought the opponents from slight disagreement to open confrontation, Gibbon's premature death in 1935 prevented his participation in the quarrel. Gunn, on the other hand, believed that national identity went beyond language to the notion of a shared cultural heritage, which, together with his Highland perspective, left him indifferent to the question of Lowland Scots. In contrast, Muir and MacDiarmid had been pushed towards a consideration of language by a number of mutual concerns. First and foremost, they were poets. Composers of verse rely more strongly on language subtleties than writers of prose, and when linguistic experimentation becomes the benchmark of poetic achievement, as happened in modernism, it is crucial for the poet to choose the right medium. Both MacDiarmid and Muir had found that decision difficult to make. Muir only developed a mature poetic voice towards the end of his career, while MacDiarmid discovered in the mid-1930s that Scots, the vehicle he had actively supported in the 1920s, was no longer adequate for his expanding vision. The second similarity between Muir and MacDiarmid is their insistence on discontinuity within Scottish experience. They recognised that Scottish poetry had thrived in the fifteenth century, that the Reformation had destroyed the basis of such culture, and that in order to regain a strong literary tradition in Scotland, they had to restore to Scottish writing the element that had enabled Robert Henryson and William Dunbar to engage with universal matters in a distinctively Scottish voice. To Muir, the strength of the Golden Age poets was their unified world vision. In the fifteenth century, such cohesion could be expressed through the vernacular because it had been the language for thought as

well as feeling; in the twentieth century that was impossible because of the decline of Scots. Hence the Scottish poet had no choice but to follow Muir's own example and accept an English model for his/her art. To MacDiarmid, on the contrary, the lost element was native genius, which brought him to the opposite conclusion. In the opening part of *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*, he suggested that the decline of Scots poetry was the result of the erosion of native tradition, which was brought about by the long-term assimilation of Scotland into Britain (MacDiarmid 1926/1987: 6-12). Against such a flawed, anglicised culture, he placed "Auld Scottish instincts" (MacDiarmid 1926/1987: 14): if a Scottish poet was to create Scottish literature, he/she had to reject the alien (read English) aspect as that was the only way Scottish tradition might be accepted on its own terms.

MacDiarmid and Muir's theories of language represent absolute positions, and in practice no Renaissance writer was as categorical. Gunn, whose ancestral tongue was Gaelic, not Scots, shows little interest in the language problem, though he saw the potentials of the vernacular in relation to the question of nationhood. Gibbon, who in theory was very hard on writers such as Muir and Gunn, who had chosen English as their medium, published fiction in both languages, which compromises his position somewhat. Also MacDiarmid employed English as well as Scots throughout his career, which contradicts his insistence on the vernacular in the criticism. To the majority of these writers, the polemics thus made an issue of something that never bothered them in practice. The exception is Muir, to whom language appears to have been a serious concern in the 1930s. Throughout the inter-war period he remained sceptical about the potential of Scottish nationhood, which may have influenced his stance on language. Whatever his reasons, Muir came to the paradoxical conclusion that the Scots vernacular was dead at a time when it reached new heights in the writings of MacDiarmid and Gibbon, which leaves the reader wondering whether the only author suffering from a "dissociated sensibility" was not in fact Edwin Muir.

### *Literature:*

The inter-war representation of Scottish literary tradition brings together the interpretation of Scottish history as a process of long-term decay with the myth of dissociation. The Scottish Renaissance writers perceived their work as completely unprecedented in its fusion of tradition and modernism, native and international



elements, and in order to press their point, they highlighted the differences between their own present and the past. The motivation behind much Renaissance criticism was the "anxiety of influence", which Robert Crawford discusses in *Devolving English Literature* with reference to T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (Crawford 1992: 230). Where Eliot and Pound adopted the slogan "Make It New" in order to challenge the preconceptions within English tradition, however, their Scottish contemporaries applied their reconsideration of literary tradition to Scottish writing specifically.

The account of Scottish literature the reader encounters in MacDiarmid, Muir, Gunn and Gibbon reflects the idea of a discontinuous tradition. As I mentioned in relation to the questions of Calvinism and language, the authors accepted the reign of James IV as a high point in the development of Scottish culture, but the impact of the Reformation had brought Scotland's fifteenth-century Renaissance to an end. In the paragraph from *Scott and Scotland* I quoted above, Edwin Muir stressed that Scottish literature collapsed after 1560 (p. 200). According to the twentieth-century Renaissance critics, the main causes for the disruption were the erosion of nationhood, intense anglicisation, and the impact of Calvinism, against which they would place the native impulse behind the inter-war revival. The support for the Scottish Renaissance ranges from the passionate commitment of MacDiarmid and Gunn to the more restrained views of Muir and Gibbon, but they met in the desire to present themselves as a new departure in Scottish letters.

An important part of the revaluation of Scottish literature is the deconstruction of the literary past. The main focus for the Renaissance assault is the Victorian age, for in the Celtic Twilight novels of Fiona Macleod and the Kailyard fiction of Ian Maclaren, among others, the nineteenth-century authors had imagined a Scotland that was unreal. In *Scottish Journey* Muir denounces such oversentimentalisation:

The flight to the Kailyard was a flight to Scotland's past, to a country which had existed before Industrialism; but by the time the flight took place Industrialism itself had sucked that tradition dry of its old vigour; it was no longer of importance except as a refuge from the hard facts of Scottish town life. (Muir 1935/1985: 67-68)

Although it could be argued that the inter-war critics merely removed one myth in order to replace it with another of their own making, MacDiarmid, Muir, Gunn and Gibbon were all dismissive of the manner in which nineteenth-century writers had distorted Scottish reality. The most direct encounters with the Victorian legacy emerge from the

novels, which is probably to be expected, given that so much nineteenth-century literature was fiction. I previously mentioned how Gunn had used his first works to underline how the Celtic Twilight had misrepresented Highland life, whereas Gibbon's prologue to *Sunset Song* located his novel somewhere between Kailyard and anti-Kailyard (p. 194). Because of their different backgrounds, the specific types of fiction the two novelists engaged with differed. Yet both underlined the need for the modern writers to challenge their literary ancestors in order to move forward.

With regard to the national icons of Burns and Scott, the most frequent commentary occurs in the criticism of Muir and MacDiarmid. It seems inevitable that MacDiarmid, who aimed for recognition as a great, vernacular poet, should have wanted to cut his ancestor Burns down to a more manageable size, but Muir's problems with Scott are more paradoxical. At the heart of Scott's vision, Muir claimed in *Scott and Scotland*, was a blank, but as I discussed above, that vacuum seems to have been the product of Muir's imagination rather than Scott's (p. 179). In *Lucky Poet* MacDiarmid jumps to Scott's defence:

Muir has, for all his clever analysis, missed the point of Scott's significance, which the part his work played in inspiring the resurgence of Flemish and Catalan shows. As can be gathered from Brandes, Scott's only value is his objective treatment of parts of Scottish history and the partial revivification by his influence of the two mentioned and other minority literatures. The whole direction of Scott's line was his regret for the quite needless passing of Scottish institutions, mannerisms, &c., into English, as exemplified in many of his famous sayings – e. g., about an un-Scotched Scotsman becoming a damned bad Englishman, &c. This leads on naturally to the separatist position.... (MacDiarmid 1943: 202-3).

Although he redeems Scott on account of his nationalism in this particular example, MacDiarmid is as dismissive as Muir elsewhere. Around 1900 Scott and Burns were accepted as the climax of Scottish tradition by literary historians such as J. H. Millar and T. F. Henderson, and the cultivation of such icons made it hard for modern writers to reach an audience in Scotland. In order to improve their own situation, the moderns sought out ways to rival their ancestors. The best strategy was through the achievement of greatness in their own art, of course, but their progress might be speeded up through the deconstruction of the ivory towers – an attempt to reduce the icons to more human proportions. Even if they occasionally differed in their reading of individual authors,



both MacDiarmid and Muir therefore adopted a demolition strategy in order to create space for twentieth century-writing.

With reference to literature, there seems to have been a consensus among the four writers about the need for a reconsideration of literary tradition. Gunn's Highland origins make him concerned with the Celtic Twilight, where Gibbon engages with the Kailyard; MacDiarmid's interest in Scots draws him towards Burns while Muir is obsessed with Scott. Though individual differences persist, Muir, MacDiarmid, Gunn and Gibbon are in agreement over the method an author might adopt in his/her revaluation of Scottish tradition, which leaves literature the one of my five Renaissance themes to receive the most consistent treatment. Yet such cohesion is probably inevitable, given that the representatives of most periods in literature would want to see their art as a departure from rather than an imitation of their literary forebears.

### **The dissociated imagination? The Renaissance legacy**

From my discussion of the visions of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Neil Gunn in relation to the five themes of geography, history, religion, language and literature, I think it is possible to derive two general myths. The first is a constructive myth, which increases the visibility of Scotland as an distinct entity at a time when the nation was only too easily assimilated into a united, British experience. The second myth is deconstructive, for the discontinuity and dissociation that came to the fore in the inter-war polemics could be seen to weaken the Renaissance writers' case for Scotland. Both have been highly influential in the perception of Scottish inter-war literature as I shall return to below.

To begin with the constructive myth, I will argue that Scottish Renaissance literature has contributed to the twentieth-century construction of Scotland as an imagined community. In part one I considered how the inter-war writing increased the concern with national autonomy, whilst trying to convey a sense of community to a nation commonly perceived as internally divided. The changing perception of the nation, which is the product of such revaluation, is reflected in the Renaissance writers' employment of the five themes I considered above. With reference to space, MacDiarmid, Muir, Gunn and Gibbon choose an image of Scotland that is free from past romanticism and sentimentalism, in the hope they might present a landscape reminiscent of Scottish reality. Their Scotlands are locally based, but the artists would claim that it is possible to

approach universals from such narrow ground. In consequence, they regard Scotland as a setting as fit for modern literature as any other place, which underlines their confidence in their nation. Historically, the Renaissance vision is important because it stresses that the country's Golden Age was not the era of Walter Scott, when Scottish intellectuals came to accept that their future lay with a United, British Kingdom, but the fifteenth century of Henryson and Dunbar when Scotland had been in control of its own affairs and in touch with the European mainstream. The implication is that the nation had thrived whilst sovereign, declined once Scotland imitated English manners, which invites the conclusion that Scotland would perform better on its own. The effects of the religious dispute are less connected to the visibility of the nation, although the literature suggests that something in Catholic Scotland was more beneficial to native genius than Calvinism, which had hastened the assimilation of Scotland into England. Scotland thus comes across as a coherent nation during the Catholic era, as a nation of internal fragmentation and decline thereafter. As regards language, the concern with Scots and Gaelic is possibly the most successful strategy adopted to increase the awareness of Scottish nationhood. Hitherto it had been possible to categorise Scottish writers as representatives of a provincial element within English literature; after the vernacular work of MacDiarmid and Gibbon it became increasingly difficult to view Scottish writing as anything but a literature apart. The language issue relates closely to the question of literature. The four writers deliberately promote authors who represented a strong, independent tradition, while rejecting the icons of Britishness. Hence they insist on the Scottishness of Scottish literature and locate their own efforts within a native vein. In conclusion, I will argue that my four representatives of the Scottish Renaissance, in their treatment of different aspects of Scottish experience, contributed to the creation of a more visible Scottish nation. In their insistence on Scottishness as something distinct from Britishness, they challenged the vision of nineteenth-century intellectuals, who had accepted Scotland as North Britain; and whether or not the individual author supported such an ideology, that challenge prepared the way for political nationalism.

Against a constructive myth of Scottishness, I will place the deconstructive myth of dissociation. The four writers may agree on the most general level about the importance of Scottish difference, but they differ in their commitment to Scotland and such variety of opinion could be seen as harmful. To begin with geography, the reinvention of



Scotland depends on more than a deromanticisation of the landscape. In order to see Scotland as a nation, the artist would have to imagine Scotland whole, but only MacDiarmid and Gunn manage that feat. Muir and Gibbon, in contrast, find no way to overcome internal fragmentation, and their scepticism weaken the Renaissance argument. As regards history, Gibbon and Muir are problematic once again. They insist on a fifteenth-century Golden Age, of course, but when it comes to the present, they fall short of a nationalist conclusion. While MacDiarmid and Gunn believe that Scotland may regain its vitality through a programme of national regeneration, Gibbon and Muir prefer a kind of social reconstruction imposed from without, which calls into question Scotland's ability to affect change on its own. In religious matters, the authors agree that Calvinism is bad for the nation, but disagree over the reasons why that is the case. Muir's "dissociation of sensibility" thesis is the most extreme in its conclusion that Scotland has no choice but to accept that its days of sovereignty are gone. Gunn and MacDiarmid tie the Reformation legacy to the question of nationhood, while Gibbon views religion as a problem for all humanity rather than an issue peculiar to Scotland. As a result, the group split into two optimists, Gunn and MacDiarmid, who find hope in a future restoration of Scottish autonomy, and the pessimists Gibbon and Muir, who perceive Presbyterianism as evidence of a basic flaw in Scottish character. Such divisions are deepened by the language dispute. Gibbon's views on language place him in the category of MacDiarmid, who supports the notion of Scottish literature written in Scots. Somewhat marginal to the language discussion is Gunn, whose linguistic heritage is Gaelic, while Muir dismisses the notion of a future for Scots altogether. In spite of the ferocious polemics, I do not think that the language controversy is as injurious to the idea of Scotland as Muir and Gibbon's general lack of confidence in Scotland, however, for, as I have previously mentioned, the Renaissance writers picked whatever linguistic medium seemed most suitable to them, regardless of their public poses. The theme of literature, finally, is the area where we find most cohesion. All authors settle for a Golden Age-fall-Renaissance structure, which is to say that any differences reflect personal preference rather than an underlying, ideological disparity. To sum up: the myth of dissociation which challenges the nationalist attempt to strengthen the image of Scotland in literature, is most evident in relation to geography, history and religion, where Muir and Gibbon's lack of belief in the nation indirectly undermines the optimistic visions of MacDiarmid and Gunn.

Though the constructive myth of Scottishness is evident in the way the representation of Scotland has changed in the twentieth century, the deconstructive myth of dissociation has dominated the discussion of the Scottish Renaissance in literary criticism. Most prominent in the criticism have been the idea of (dis-)continuity and the idea of dissociation. The concern with continuity is most obvious in Kurt Wittig's *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* and David Craig's *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People*, although the need to identify some kind of continuous development survives into the later surveys of Roderick Watson (1984) and Marshall Walker (1996). Although Maurice Lindsay's *History of Scottish Literature* offers the exception that proves the rule, it is inevitable that literary historians should select a few, recurrent themes to connect Scottish writers throughout the centuries. The changing use of the Scots vernacular in the poetry of Dunbar, Burns and MacDiarmid, for instance, should be considered as different stages within a developing, vernacular tradition rather than isolated cases, while the vision of Muir's later verse makes more sense in the light of Henryson. Where such long-term relationships become problematic is when the critics view one period in literature through the eyes of another. In *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People*, for instance, David Craig offers an academic account of the post-Reformation collapse of Scottish culture:

We have to recognise, then, that there did not emerge along with modern Scotland a mature, "all-round" literature. Sheer social forces – centralisation, emigration, the widespread wasting away of the regional and the vernacular – were against the sustained output of anything like a *separate* literature for Scotland. By the close of this period that has become, simply, something it would be unreasonable to look for. (D. Craig 1961: 14)

Behind Craig's words, we detect a number of Renaissance myths. It is taken for granted that post-Reformation literature is inferior to whatever came before; that the decline in Scottish literature is related to the weakening of the Scottish nation, and that the strength of Scottish writing may be measured by the strength of the vernacular. Such conclusions are not unfamiliar to the Renaissance, which raises the question of whether Craig voices the ideas of Muir and MacDiarmid rather than his own. Although David Craig and Wittig appear somewhat dated today when a new generation of critics is emerging, they thus serve as reminders of the dangers, once we accept the Scottish Literary Renaissance on its own terms.



While advocates of continuity tend to overestimate the importance of Renaissance ideology, proponents of the myth of dissociation only reluctantly grant to the inter-war writers the difference they made. In their reading of Scottish tradition, these critics insist on the inconsistencies within individual visions, as well as incoherence within the Renaissance group as a whole, and in consequence, the period fragments. Gerard Carruthers' "The construction of the Scottish critical tradition" offers one example where the author deconstructs the argument of Edwin Muir without any consideration of where Muir is coming from (Carruthers 1999). Robert Crawford's recent promotion of Gregory Smith in *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* represents an alternative view that could prove equally damaging to our perception of the Scottish Renaissance. Crawford writes:

Thanks to Gregory Smith, MacDiarmid is able to shift the centre of gravity of literary production and literary studies in Scotland so that there begins in the early twentieth century a gradual movement even in the Scottish universities to accord full recognition to Scottish literature as a branch of study, allowing it access to the privileges and penalties of institutional power two centuries after Adam Smith, Blair, Watson, and others had sought to eradicate the very markers of cultural difference which Gregory Smith and MacDiarmid were keen to identify, celebrate and even redeploy. (Crawford 1998: 237-38)

Crawford's observations are not problematic in themselves, but they only too easily lead on to an overemphasis on the "Caledonian Antisyzygy". Undoubtedly, Smith inspired MacDiarmid to a positive revaluation of Scottish tradition, but as a critical construct, the "Caledonian Antisyzygy" shares with Muir's "dissociation of Scottish sensibility" a modernist concern with contrast. It is symptomatic, in other words, of the things that divide rather than the things that unite within Scottish culture, and I believe we misrepresent the period literature if we insist on inconsistency only. Accordingly, the obsession with "antisyzygy" and "dissociation" is as harmful for our understanding of Scottish inter-war literature as the insistence on continuity, which underlines the need for a third way.

In the course of my work, I have become increasingly attracted to an interpretation of the Scottish Renaissance that combines a recognition of individual differences with an acknowledgement of the specific historical circumstances that pushed the authors to their conclusions. I am aware of the significance of Susanne Hagemann's *Die Schottische Renaissance* as a pioneer study, which has tried to challenge the

misconceptions of the period, but I find Hagemann wanting on the level of abstraction. Hence she never manages to bring the writers of the Renaissance together in a way that might establish the discourse I would like to see at the centre of any consideration of the period. A more useful approach is that of Cairns Craig in *The Modern Scottish Novel*. I previously referred to Craig's challenge to the traditional perception of Scottish literature, but I think it is appropriate to return to it here. Against the defeatism, which the portrait of a divided culture is commonly taken to convey, Craig places energy derived from the meeting of opposites:

To explore and to celebrate the multiplicities of the self is to recognise the fact that the self is never self-contained – that the “divided self” is not to be contrasted with the “undivided self” but with the “self-in-relation”: the “divided self” is precisely the product of the failure of the dialectic of “self and other” rather than the outcome of the self's failure to maintain its autonomy and singularity. The inner otherness of Scottish culture – Highland and Lowland, Calvinist and Catholic – thus becomes the very model of the complexity of the self rather than examples of its failure: the self-division of the schizophrenic is not an “other” to a unified normalcy but the failure of the acceptance of the other which constitutes the normal self. (C. Craig 1999: 114)

Craig's comments are relevant with reference to the Scottish Renaissance because they challenge the way the contrasting visions of Muir and MacDiarmid have been interpreted as a manifestation of Scottish schizophrenia. Scottish culture was never schizophrenic, Craig stresses, but conscious of its own “inner otherness” – the complexities that demand that the self define itself in relation to other, alternative selves. The implication of Craig's thesis is that there can be no Muir without a MacDiarmid, no Gunn without Gibbon. Accordingly, the Scottish Literary Renaissance consists of a general debate over the questions of Scotland and Scottishness, and such a discourse requires sceptics as well as enthusiasts, Muir's “dissociated sensibility” besides MacDiarmid's “antizysygy”. My term for such an exchange is “polyphony”, a word employed by M. M. Bakhtin. In the glossary to Pam Morris's *Bakhtin Reader*, polyphony is characterised as a word “used by Bakhtin primarily to describe Dostoevsky's ‘multi-voiced’ novels, whereby author's and heroes' discourses interact on equal terms” (Morris 1994: 249). It is the “interaction of discourse on equal terms” aspect of the definition that is interesting in the present context. In my study of the Scottish Literary Renaissance I have focused on four artists who are equally



representative of the inter-war ethos, but who may only be brought together through a recognition of individual difference, of their "multi-voiced polyphony".

If it is necessary to try to understand the discursive character of the Scottish Renaissance, it is equally important to realise that Scottish literature has moved on since the 1930s and that we are essentially dealing with a period of history. My main problem with the criticism of Kurt Wittig and David Craig, among others, is that they perceive the ideas of Muir and MacDiarmid as universally applicable, when they were in fact products of their time. The thesis of discontinuity, for example, on which so many of Muir's pronouncements are based, reflects the way the inter-war generation responded to the experience of the First World War. MacDiarmid's "Caledonian Antisyzygy", on the other hand, shows a nationalist concern with Scottish peculiarities, which in the 1920 and 1930s were perceived to be threatened by the nineteenth-century insistence on Britishness. When we read these writers in their chronological context, such concepts make sense because they interact with the political, social and cultural considerations of the time; when we use them outside their temporal setting, in contrast, they appear vague and abstract. In the course of the twentieth century, we have witnessed a growing awareness of the differences between the cultural climate of Enlightenment Edinburgh and contemporary Scotland, which has brought with it a critical reappraisal of the writings of Walter Scott. Likewise it is my hope that my examination of the work of Hugh MacDiarmid, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Edwin Muir and Neil Gunn within the historical context of inter-war Scotland may contribute something to a further understanding of these authors and their situation in their period.

In conclusion, I think a revaluation of the Scottish Literary Renaissance that takes into account the discursive character of the literature and the historical circumstances that produced it, is long overdue. In my analysis I have approached such revisionism, but I am aware that my limited focus conditions whatever conclusions I have drawn. Nevertheless, I believe I have made some progress towards a more satisfactory interpretation of the Scottish inter-war revival.

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In accordance with the Harvard System of referencing, most primary and secondary texts appear within the same list of consulted material. I have taken the liberty of distinguishing the work of my principal writers from the rest, however, because I think it makes my bibliography more user-friendly.

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